

## THE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

### BILLY SULLIVAN

Everything is real, everything is performance: BILLY SULLIVAN began portraying protagonists of the art and fashion world long before Elizabeth Peyton. Painters and models, collectors and junkies, Warhol's superstars and John Waters' muses. Sullivan turns them all into aristocrats of an imaginary court.

**Oliver Koerner von Gustorf** met with the great survivor of New York subculture.

"I see time like through a telescope – in my work and in my life," says Billy Sullivan. The traffic is roaring below in the Bowery. The artist has been working in this loft with high windows and gray-painted floors for over forty years. You can see what he means on his studio walls, which are covered with photos, paintings and pastels. Scenes from various periods are captured there, small universes in a solar system of moments.

Behind a trolley full of brushes and paint tubes hangs a series he has only just begun: one picture after another of the same young man, lying in an armchair with his pants down, masturbating. Introverted in some of the pictures, lasciviously eyeballing the viewer in others.

An intimate, delicately dabbed scene reminiscent of the gay pin-ups, sailors and bodybuilders in *Physique Pictorial* mags of the '50s and '60s and the powdery hues of Rococo painter Jean-Honoré Fragonard. If these pictures had a flavor, it would be anise candy, a warm sweetness that gets hotter and hotter and is adult through and through.

"I love watching what goes on with the models, what I'm perceiving is going on in their minds, the excitement of watching their own bodies. It brings me back to being young." And yet at over seventy, Billy Sullivan seems amazingly youthful, mischievous. Born in Brooklyn, he has those Italo-Irish features, prominent chin, high forehead, unruly locks of gray hair. While we talk about his fixation with male genitalia, he puts down his teaspoon, grabs a camera and starts shooting from his armchair. That feeling of Warhol's Factory immediately comes over me, of those films in which they're always talking about everything and everyone, while people are cutting their hair, shooting up or having sex.

On the wall next to us hangs a sea of color copies and chalk drawings pinned together like a giant mood board. A photo of former Warhol superstar Jackie Curtis, which Sullivan shot in 1969, stands out like a picture of a saint among people, still lifes of flowers and birds. Curtis was not only a cross dresser whose androgynous look inspired the Glam rock style, but also a singer, actor and poet. A New York institution. Lou Reed sang about Curtis's drug-fueled decline in "Walk on the Wild Side": "Jackie is just speeding away / Thought she was James Dean for a day." Sullivan shows him as being both glamorous and vulnerable, the way only a friend can capture him. Tears sparkle like glitter under Curtis's kohl-lined eyes. Everything is real, everything is performance. This here is a life sacrificed for art, a life that altogether becomes art.

"Jackie and I went to high school together," Sullivan recounts. "New York was this open place where people moved in and out. When Max's Kansas City was where you went every night. Everybody who came to New York would go there; like Janis Joplin was there. We hung out in the back room. The front room was for the abstract painters and the older artists. We were in the back room. Andy would come and everybody

would make some sort of theater. Everybody would come late because they had to put on their make-up and get dressed.”

Back then in the late '60s, Sullivan already began portraying his friends – superstars, collectors, Club Kids, curators, artists, models, agents, literati. Just about every legend of the New York art and fashion world figures in his cosmos, whether it be John Waters' muse Cookie Mueller, night club luminaries like Chi Chi Valenti, young Sofia Coppola or MoMA curator Kynaston McShine. For decades he has been taking pictures of them wherever he goes and using the photos as templates for pastels and paintings. What looks harsh and snapshot-like in the photos takes on a light, playful, poetic quality in Sullivan's paintings.

In fact he combines in his art the legend around the Factory and the ethos of New York's painting scene with a profound knowledge of past avant-gardes and European art history. Long before Elizabeth Peyton, he depicted the Manhattan scene as the aristocrats of an imaginary court: androgynous, with powder-white skin and red lips. The smoothed-out, somewhat mask-like aspect of Sullivan's portraits recalls Warhol's overexposed Polaroid and silk-screen portraits. Andy did the best plastic surgery painting of all time, says Sullivan. In his own paintings, too, the face becomes a surface on which only the basic distinctive features and no wrinkles remain. And yet a delicate blush shimmers on these porcelain complexions, calling to mind the milk-white pallor of Édouard Manet's courtesans and bar maids. The figures in his photos, when transformed in painting, are actually endowed with something classic. A woman friend bathing has, in her pose, all the charm of Pierre Bonnard's bathtub pictures. And the light-flooded interiors and lustrous colors seem influenced as much by Post-Impressionism as by the present.

Sullivan's painting sometimes seems as though a curtain were drawn aside and bright light fell on the subjects, bringing clarity, purity, even innocence into these lives. The light of the slide projector he uses to project photographs onto screens and paper turns into something transcendent in his painting. It's like an energy that connects everything together, that accords everything the same importance. At the outset, says Sullivan, drawing from a projection was like meditating: “You get totally absorbed into this thing. There is this air between the picture and what you do with your hand. In this gap, the gesture, the whole language happens. You feel time passing as it grows.”

Leafing through Sullivan's 2016 book, *Still, Looking*, you get the feeling of a strangely timeless and placeless bohemian world that could just as easily be located in New York as on the French Riviera. The spaces he draws are sketchy, rudimentary. There are no hierarchies in the choice of media either. Photos, paintings and drawings follow one after the other without any chronology, in an intuitive visual narrative. It looks as though life were one big party. Interrupted by still lifes with flowers, which hark back to Henri Matisse or 18th-century French pastel painting, a never-ending day blooms in the colors of summer. Afternoons on the beach, children playing, partying and clubbing by night, boat trips, vacation days. Although much of it covers the same drugs-and-booze-soaked world of '80s excess depicted by Nan Goldin in her famous 1986 photobook *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, we come across no wounds or bruises here, and hardly any bitterness or disappointment. Sullivan celebrates the lightness of being.

When asked what fascinates him about people, what prompts him to take or paint their picture, he answers, “If I get interested in them, then I want to see these people again. I really think they have something I'm looking for. It's also how they look, how they dress. It's not really about fashion, but fashion plays into it . . . finally I can use the word fashion. Fashion was always looked down on, but I've always looked at it.”

How close Sullivan is to fashion is also evident in shots from a session with British peroxide-blond top model Agyness Deyn, which are pinned to the corkboard in Sullivan's studio. They were taken in 2008, at the height of Deyn's fame. *i-D* devoted a whole issue to her at the time – the first time this British lifestyle magazine had ever paid such a tribute to anyone. In keeping with Deyn's punk image, Sullivan shot a sequence in the style of the early '80s, the era in which New York clubs like Danceteria, the Palladium and Area elevated hedonistic nightlife to an art form. What's uncanny about these pictures of Agyness Deyn is how much they resemble the originals from the early years. One can hardly tell which pictures were taken when. And not only because Deyn, festooned with neon-colored plastic jewelry, in a leather jacket and leopard print, looks like she's just stumbled out of the Pyramid Club.

In Sullivan's world there is no chronological time. While some protagonists emerged only to disappear again shortly thereafter, others age in his oeuvre. Still others remain just as Sullivan remembers them in certain situations, like his son Max. He was only 32 when he died hang-gliding in 2005. After his death, Sullivan dug out some old photos from the '70s, back when he was still married to the artist Amy Sullivan, and began recapturing Max's childhood. In the book, this is above all the beach scenes in the Hamptons.

"She was fantastic," Sullivan says as we stand at the corkboard gazing at a 1974 photograph of Jane Forth, a model and Warhol superstar, sunbathing topless. Two little boys are playing in the sand behind her. "That's her son, and there's my son. She just came out to the Hamptons for the weekend. She was one of my first muses. And look, these are real tits. She was beautiful. She used to wear high heels to the beach."

At this point it becomes clear how many levels there are to Sullivan's work. There are the stars, hotel rooms, rumpled beds and all-night parties. There are the anecdotes, the who's who, the well-known names that get reeled off, as from a telephone directory, in conversations with or about Sullivan. But there are also fathers, mothers, families, love affairs, lifelong friendships. A very personal, fragile, fine-meshed network which Sullivan preserves and protects in his pictures, but in which holes appear in real life that can never be closed up.

One of the central figures in Sullivan's pictures is Klaus Kertess, for example, his partner for over forty years. He met him in the late '70s, when Kertess had just closed down his Bykert Gallery, already legendary in those days, where he'd shown the likes of Brice Marden, Chuck Close and Dorothea Rockburne, who later became giants of contemporary art. Feminist artist Lynda Benglis and gallerist Mary Boone also worked as secretaries in the gallery before launching their own careers and becoming world-famous themselves. Fredericka Hunter, whose Texas Gallery in Houston hosted Sullivan's first solo show, in 1974, was a mutual acquaintance. Sullivan and Kertess had kept missing each other by sheer coincidence, but Hunter eventually rented a summer house in East Hampton, where they met over dinner and fell in love right away. "In the middle of dinner Klaus and I went swimming," Sullivan recalls. "That was how it all started – in the middle of the night in the ocean. It was beautiful."

In *Still, Looking* we see the various periods of this great love: the desire, warmth, tender-loving care between two men who got married and formed a power couple in the New York scene. Kertess was one of the leading writers and curators in the '90s. He curated the Whitney Biennial in 1995 as well as a great many exhibitions in subsequent years. Sullivan dedicates the title picture of his book to him, a drawing from a 2015 photo. Another beach scene. Though the sky is pale. The decorative pattern on Kertess's beach pants is the only animated element of this melancholy, lost-in-thought picture, in which Sullivan's husband turns his back to the viewer and gazes at the sea. He was

already in an advanced stage of Alzheimer's when the picture was taken. The drawing was done in 2016, perhaps when Kertess was already dead.

Sullivan talks about his loss, the bottomless pit he feels he's in, the strength he finds in his work: "It's the only place where I can work through what I'm going through. And right now I'm in a mourning process. I have to own the fact that I am mourning the loss of my husband." He's still busy clearing out the apartment and examining the estate. We talk about growing old, emptiness, cluelessness – about dating and sex apps, which don't make any real sense if there's no one there to come home to anymore.

If you look closely, the lightness in Sullivan's pictures is riddled with goodbyes. *Still, Looking* covers not only the days of hard drugs, but also the AIDS crisis. Jackie Curtis overdosed on heroin in 1985. Cookie Mueller and ravishingly beautiful Sirpa, shown in Sullivan's drawings bare-breasted in a hotel bed, kneeling over her breakfast, both died from HIV. There are photographs on his studio wall of his friend Trisha Brown, one of the most seminal choreographers of contemporary dance, who died in March. Sullivan is now going to work on her pictures too.

When I ask whether painting has a spiritual dimension for him, he says, "Spirituality is everything in my life. What matters to me is being wholly in the present. I have to totally immerse myself in the painting, in the moment, and can't let anything interfere, in order to be really present and experience this. All my pictures are about being in the moment. It's like an awakening. It's about figuring out how to be positive, it's about accepting life."

This radical acceptance, the will to find beauty and fulfillment in every experience, however painful it may be, recalls Nietzsche's idea of eternal return, that all events recur an infinite number of times. In this sense, Sullivan's work is not about events, people, memories, but about coming to grips with them – about a view of life, the perspective of a painter who is searching, continually repositioning himself in time.

Interestingly enough, Sullivan, who grew up in an art, film and fashion scene that toyed with everything and everyone, calls for something like authenticity. His work frequently verges on the commercial, whether creating murals for hotels or supplying paintings for the 1997 Jack Nicholson movie *As Good as It Gets* to bring the flair of New York's gay art scene into the Academy Award-winning comedy. The man, whom many an art hardliner finds too close to fashion, to the zeitgeist and the scene, who paints social anecdotes, flowers and boobs, is looking for something like a true self. "The answer is simply to be honest and to be there," he says.

And then he comes to the great abstract expressionist Joan Mitchell, with whom he was close friends during the final years of her life. He recounts how he went to MoMA with her to see a show on the early 20th century with floral paintings by Piet Mondrian, and how awed they both were. "I love Joan's work. She's got these beautiful free brushstrokes, they're a flow of motion. I've always understood that as being like a language. She made a stroke and made movement. People like Brice Marden and Carroll Dunham make a stroke. Or Alice Neel, she looked at people and saw something in them and just allowed it happen. She didn't correct it, didn't move around it or try to turn it into something else. So it became an Alice Neel."

Sullivan's own painting, which thrives wholly on flow, on gesture, can be seen in similar terms. It makes a mark in the now, without mourning the past or speculating about the future. Sullivan, the great survivor of New York subculture, lives in the now. He is not by any means looking for a lost era. When I ask why the art scene harbors so much nostalgia for the 1970s and '80s, he answers serenely, "I was there so I don't have it."

PULL QUOTES IN THE GERMAN ARTICLE:

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CAPTIONS:

Opening spread:

TOWN LINE BEACH

2016, pastel on paper, 195 x 132 cm

SELF-PORTRAIT

2015, pastel on paper, 51 x 36 cm

SAILOR IN WINDOW

1998, Watercolor on paper, 76 x 60 cm

SOFIA

1997, pastel on paper, 53 x 38 cm

ALESSIO, SAG HARBOR

2007, oil on canvas, 53 x 76 cm

AGYNESS AND TEDDY

2008, pastel on paper, 76 x 53 cm

MADRID LILIES

2010, oil on canvas, 107 x 76 cm