

billy sullivan

muses

opening reception november 21, 6-9pm

november 22, 2019 - january 11, 2020

kaufmann repetto is pleased to present *Muses*, Billy Sullivan's fifth solo exhibition with the gallery, and his fourth in Milan.

The exhibition focuses on the primary significance of portraiture in Sullivan's work over the past five decades, and explores the broad array of muses he finds among friends, lovers, acquaintances, and even strangers. Certainly one kind of muse that recurs in Sullivan's work, inflected by his own particular queer sensibility, offers the more expected stimulations of physical beauty and erotic *frisson*. But perhaps even more frequently, a muse displays attributes that may indeed be somehow sexy but are not necessarily sexual per se – an attitude, a sense of style, some kind of creativity, or just a way of being in the world.

Each portrait originates from a photograph that Sullivan takes and, back in the studio, puts to use as a template for a painting or drawing. In the process of manually and graphically translating this image into another medium, the camera's quick moment is drawn out into the slower ruminative tempo and space of memory. Details and focal points are markedly edited by the artist's touch, which variously amplifies or compresses in a dance of displacement and reconstitution.

For *Muses*, Sullivan stages two distinct installations in the gallery's twin spaces. In the first space, two walls are hung salon-style with nearly forty works on paper, which range considerably in size and medium and survey the entire span of Sullivan's career. Although they are installed according to a play of association that subverts chronological time, nonetheless each work offers a diaristic glimpse into some aspect of the artist's life.

Ten large early drawings feature dark, bold palettes and a free mixture of pastels and paints. Two of these serve as personal bookends for all the other muses. One is a 1971 self-portrait with Amy, Sullivan's wife at the time and the mother of his two children. The second is a 1974 portrait of curator Klaus Kertess, who would become Sullivan's partner and husband until his death in 2016. Other works introduce us to transgender model Michelle Long, underground fashion designers Larissa Jarzombek and Delia Dougherty, photographer Carol Beckwith (in a blonde wig), and an anonymous "Cowboy" who randomly appeared at a party in 1982. Two 1972 drawings, looking back to Sullivan's gig as set designer for Andy Warhol's 1971 production of *Pork* in London, harness the glamour of a Janis-Joplin-like diva named Vi, who swoons in and out of a Quaaludes stupor.

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Smaller ink drawings from the 1990s transition to the lighter palettes and airier touch of the past two decades. While Christian, Brock, and John glow with erotic heat, we also encounter fashion designer Kenzo, models Naomi Campbell, Sayoko Yamaguchi, and Agyness Deyn, model agent Louie Chaban, artists Keith Sonnier, Lawrence Weiner, Keltie Ferris, and Rachel Chandler (among others), art dealers Daniel, Alessio, and Hazel, and Sullivan's former students Joie, Patricia, Jason, and David.

The exhibition's newest work is a large 2019 painting of a couple named Lea and Mike, lounging contentedly on the beach, eyes closed, soaking up our gaze along with the Atlantic sun.

The second gallery space is installed with a selection of six recent oil paintings. Two of these are portraits of Sullivan's peers: in one, Carroll "Tip" Dunham gazes in profile towards the other end of his studio, surrounded by the bizarrely comic sexual energy of his own paintings. The second, from 2012, shows the recently deceased poet and artist John Giorno receiving a visitor into his sunny loft located just up the Bowery from Sullivan's studio. In another surprise pairing, Agyness Deyn reappears beside choreographer Trisha Brown, who had just passed away in 2017 when Sullivan began this memorial painting based on a photograph from 1982.

In a fifth painting, our gaze is met and held by Joe Wolin, a curator and writer who poses nude in the studio as a mature, bearded odalisque, vulnerable yet open, ogled from a stack of framed drawings by previous muses Mark, Ed, and Christian.

Holding court over the whole space is a 2019 portrait of Parisian fashion designer Irié, crowned with a fur hat, who beams a warm, mischievous welcome through a grisaille of Manet blacks ornamented with pale Rococo pinks, yellows, and greens.

Billy Sullivan (b. 1946, New York) has been exhibiting nationally and internationally since 1971. He has been included in important exhibitions such as Ugo Rondinone's *I Love John Giorno* at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2015) and *White Columns*, New York (2017); *GLAM! The Performance of Style*, Tate Liverpool (2014); *Open Windows*, Addison Gallery of American Art, curated by Carroll Dunham (2012); *Come Closer: Art Around the Bowery, 1969-1989*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (2012); *Whitney Biennial: Day for Night*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2006). His recent solo exhibitions include shows at Rental Gallery, East Hampton, NY (2018); Monteverdi Art Gallery, Sarteano, Italy (2016); Ille Arts, Amagansett, New York (2015); Galerie Sabine Knust, Munich (2014); Freymond-Guth Fine Arts, Zurich (2014); Nicole Klagsbrun, New York (2012); Baldwin Gallery, Aspen, Colorado (2011); Salomon Contemporary, East Hampton, New York (2010); and Regen Projects, Los Angeles (2008). Sullivan's work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Parrish Art Museum, the Norton Museum, the Portland Museum of Art in Maine, and the Denver Art Museum, as well as many other public and private collections. His pastel drawings are currently on view in *Pastel*, organized by Nicolas Party at the FLAG Art Foundation in New York City.