

# HYPERALLERGIC

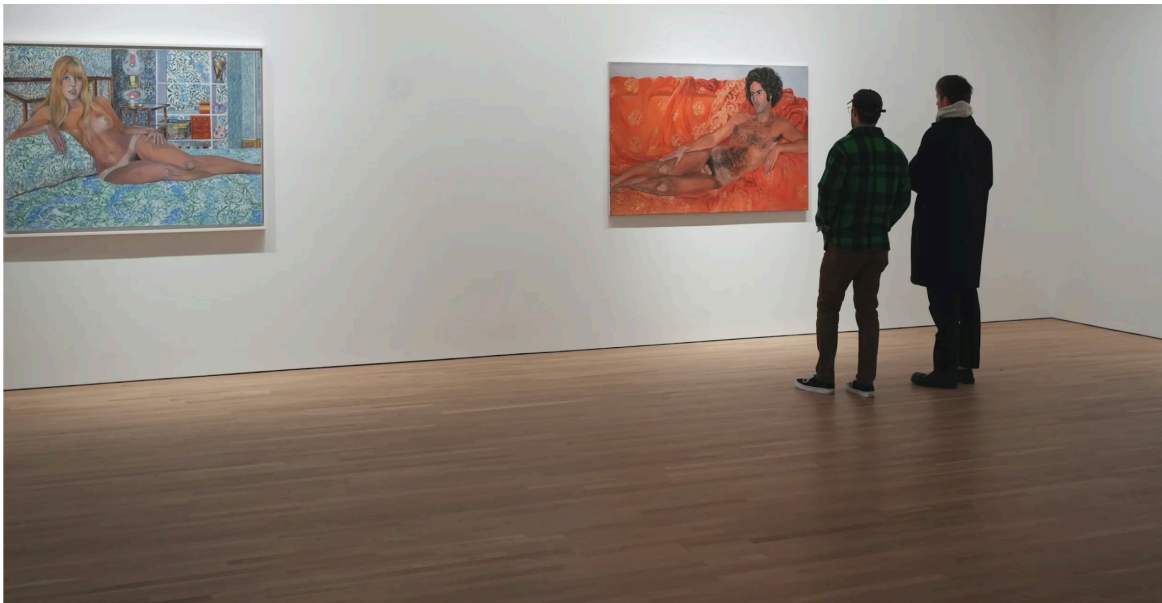
## Men Undressing for Women and Other Contemporary Takes on the Old Masters

Sylvia Sleigh challenged the traditions of portraiture by letting those she adored be their glorious selves.



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Two men look at, left, "Felicity Rainnie Reclining" (1972), and, right, "Imperial Nude: Paul Rosano" (1977) (all photos Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic*)

The effect of nude men on canvas must've been particularly titillating to American audiences of more than 50 years ago. It offered them a glimpse at what had previously been a forbidden pleasure — looking at the naked bodies of contemporary men. Over half a century later, the internet has flooded our minds with countless pics of dicks, chests, testicles, buttoles, hairy limbs, and other symbols of masculinity, if not men. Inevitably, Sylvia Sleigh's canvases come across differently.

This small survey of the Welsh-American artist lingers on her best known portraits of men from the 1960s and '70s, presenting us with images of attractive people, often with voluminous hair on their heads and bodies, who leisurely lounge for the viewer.

In an early painting from her life in the UK, “At the Cafe” (1950), Sleigh depicts herself with her partner, critic and curator Lawrence Alloway, looking at the audience with an air of anxiety that dissipates in later work. The small canvas demonstrates her affinity with other British artists of her generation, including Lucien Freud, who created similarly psychological portraits that made the subjects look introspective.



Background detail of “October: Felicity Rainnie and Paul Rosano” (1974)

By the time of her better known nude male paintings, like the large “Allan Robinson” (1968), her moody style gives way to a more supple line that draws the subject, who is also an artist, at ease, as he stares at us with a neutral expression that seems to give us permission to explore his body with our gaze.

Many of the paintings clearly evoke older Old Master poses, such as “Triple Portrait of Philip [Golub]” (1971), which captures the son of Nancy Spero and Leon Golub in the manner of Anthony Van Dyck’s “Triple Portrait of Charles I” (1635–36). Using a royal style for a young muse, Sleigh upends the expectations of traditional portraiture, much as she does by swapping men for women in traditional compositions. In “Court of Pan (After Luca Signorelli)” (1973), she recreates a Renaissance fresco that was destroyed in World War II, and inserts her husband, the young Golub, and others in a cast of characters that include a court of musicians, the god Pan, and even a Medici.

Musician Paul Rosano, one of Sleight's regular muses, appears in a number of these paintings, while artist Felicity Rainnie, one of the nude women on display, is in two works, one of which shows her fully clothed with Rosano.



Sylvia Sleight, "Allan Robinson" (1968)

Overall, the impact of each work is uneven. Some, like "Double Image: Paul Rosano" (1974), look rich in their associations and meaning, while others, like the later work "Sean Pratt as Dorante from 'The Game of Love and Chance'" (1996) is less enticing, offering us a more conventional artwork without the experimentation we find elsewhere.

Everywhere, you'll notice that while the figures may seem at first to be the expected focal points of her compositions, the backgrounds often reveal the real sophistication of her paintings. In "Felicity Rainnie Reclining" (1972), the background practically overpowers the nude, creating a sense of tension that works, while in "October: Felicity Rainnie and Paul Rosano" (1974), the figures are no competition for the riot of color and line behind them, so much so that I wished they got out of the way.



Sleight played with our expectations of the nude by shifting who we expect the subjects to be, and peopling her paintings with her immediate circles of friends and peers. She blurs the line between private and public, offering up her spouse in moments of vulnerability, but also fellow artists, colleagues, and the children of friends. We are often told by recent art history that her works are important because she treated male and female forms in a similar way, but what undergirds her paintings, as seen here, is a sense of trust and respect for her subjects, who are named and elevated into art history. She doesn't idealize these people, preferring to allow their suntan lines, veiny pricks, or distinctive hair to appear with the same care as their eyes and limbs. For her, challenging what came before means letting those we adore be their glorious selves. There's something wonderful about these paintings that feels like showing up to a nudist colony where people are fine letting it all hang out.



A view of "Court of Pan (After Luca Signorelli)" (1973) hanging in the gallery at Ortuzar



A detail of the torsos and body hair in "Double Image: Paul Rosano" (1974)

*Sylvia Sleight: Every leaf is precious continues at Ortuzar gallery (5 White Street, Tribeca, Manhattan) through April 5. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*