

## Sylvia Sleigh: Every leaf is precious February 12–April 5, 2025

Ortuzar is pleased to present *Sylvia Sleigh: Every leaf is precious*, the first solo exhibition of works by Welsh-born artist Sylvia Sleigh (1916–2010) in New York in over fifteen years. The presentation ranges from an early 1950 self-portrait painted in London to costumed scenes staged as late as 1996, with a focus on significant portraits made at the height of Sleigh’s visibility in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Sleigh first came to critical attention at this time for her reversal of academic gender norms, posing nude male friends as odalisques and bathers or as grooming before a mirror, time-honored themes traditionally reserved for women models. A paradoxical veneration for art history suffuses these works: despite her radical subversion of the male gaze and its longstanding taste for the passive female muse, the artist maintains a reverence for the canon, quoting allegorical compositions of early Flemish, Pre-Raphaelite and sixteenth-century Venetian masters. Sleigh’s practice, however, was not a simple inversion of the power dynamics of these conventions. She rejected the objectification of her subjects, transforming her sitters from anonymous archetypes into identifiable characters from her own life. The artist’s commitment to individuation is most evident in her meticulous attention to facial expressions, style as evidenced in clothing, hair or interior design, and the naming of her artist peers in her titling. She was explicit about her intent, stating, “I always painted people, and always people I know. The importance of individualism—every leaf, every person is precious, and should be loved.”<sup>1</sup>

Sleigh’s formal education combined training at the Brighton School of Art with later studies in art history at the University of London. Although she exhibited throughout her early career in the U.K., Sleigh received little public recognition until after her move to New York in 1961, accompanied by her husband, art critic and curator Lawrence Alloway. There, the couple became enmeshed in an overlapping milieu of artists and intellectuals, bolstered by Alloway’s ties to prominent art world figures and Sleigh’s friendships with leading female artists through her involvement with feminist cooperatives like A.I.R and SOHO 20 Gallery, which she co-founded.

Sleigh began chronicling her relationships as early as 1950 in *At the Cafe*, a double portrait of herself and Alloway dressed in black-tie and pearls. However, it was later during her time in New York that she began to move beyond painting straightforward portraits of her social circle, instead casting her friends as characters within constructed scenarios. This process was decidedly social, involving live sessions where sitters were arranged in intimate, lived-in interiors that eschewed the neutrality of a studio. In *Allan Robinson* (1968), Sleigh depicts her painter friend as a large-format odalisque reclining on a white sheepskin blanket, his steely gaze directed outward. The soft fuzz of Robinson’s body-hair pattern echoes the texture of the surrounding material, transfiguring the body into a decorative surface, or what Sleigh referred to as its “natural embroidery.”<sup>2</sup> Sleigh not only mimics a historic pose but pursues a formal inquiry into the Orientalist precedents she so admired, characterized by highly technical representations of ornate interiors and elaborately patterned textiles. Works like *Felicity Rainnie Reclining* (1972) and *Imperial Nude: Paul Rosano* (1977), each depicting one of Sleigh’s recurring muses, incorporate crisp suntan lines on the figures to create shapes that harmonize with the arranged geometry and decorative motifs of the surfaces on which they rest.

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Sleigh, Interview with Trinity Clark, September 1996 in: *Crossing the Threshold* (New York: Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Sleigh, “Notes on Painting the Nude,” 1975 in: *Sylvia Sleigh Papers*, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

Amid the 1970s New York art scene, where Minimalism and Pop held sway over direct representations of the body, Sleigh's work was often dismissed as lacking formal sophistication. Linda Nochlin confronts the notion of quality as a "red herring" in assessments of Sleigh's work.<sup>3</sup> She instead contends that the discomfort with Sleigh's style arises from the artist's deliberate confrontation with the roles we perceive as "natural," exposing the, for some unsettling, fluidity of identity. Nowhere is this notion more explicit than in Sleigh's double and triple portraits, where subjects are depicted from multiple angles, embodying different qualities or, as Sleigh attributed, "mysteries of the personality."<sup>4</sup> Deliberately invoking Anthony Van Dyck's *Triple Portrait of Charles I* (1635–36), *Triple Portrait of Philip Golub* (1971) observes the son of artists Nancy Spero and Leon Golub from three classical angles: profile, frontal, and three-quarters. The painting's shifting physical perspective serves as a metaphor for the transformative properties of the gaze, where the identity of the person observed changes depending on who is looking and how.

A game of misrecognition courses through Sleigh's oeuvre, where her deft manipulation of references and so-called anachronisms forms the cornerstone of her postmodern reimaginings of the past. In *Court of Pan (After Luca Signorelli)* (1973), for instance, Sleigh creates a precise replica of a fresco by the Renaissance artist destroyed in a fire during World War II. Alloway plays the court musician, while Golub appears as Pan, the reclining Giuliano de Medici, and finally as the aged shepherd. Sleigh asks us to simultaneously see and not see Golub and Alloway—both known individuals to Sleigh's audience and archetypes that disrupt the original fresco's historical allegory of pre-enlightenment virtues. A similar tension occurs in *Annunciation: Paul Rosano* (1975), where the artist reimagines her beloved model as a contemporary Archangel Gabriel—a divine messenger bare-chested and clad in cut offs, delivering tidings of holy conception in the latest 1970s countercultural trends. *Sean Pratt as Dorante from "The Game of Love and Chance"* (1996) takes on the subject of role-play in its most literal sense. The painting depicts the actor in costume from his portrayal of Dorante in the Pearl Theater Company's 1993 rendition of Marivaux's Commedia dell'arte-inspired play that centers around mistaken identities. Through her work, Sleigh bridges the historically distinct realms of portraiture and genre painting, asserting art history as a living, ongoing dialogue deeply bound in the lived experiences of her contemporaries.

Sylvia Sleigh (b. 1916; d. 2010) lived and worked in New York City. Solo exhibitions include *Sylvia Sleigh: Invitation to a Voyage*, Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York (2023); *Sylvia Sleigh: Working at Home*, Freymond-Guth & Co. Fine Arts, Zurich (2010); *Sylvia Sleigh: New Work & Portraits of Critics*, SOHO 20, New York (2004); *An Unnerving Romanticism: The Art of Sylvia Sleigh and Lawrence Alloway*, The Philadelphia Art Alliance, Philadelphia (2001). Her work is held in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio; Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia; and Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland, among others. In 1982, she was the recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts, and in 2008 was honored with the Distinguished Award for Lifetime Achievement from the College Art Association.

Ortuzar is grateful to Dr. Andrew D. Hottle for his assistance in cataloging Sleigh's work. His monograph on Sylvia Sleigh will be published in 2026. He is also preparing the catalogue raisonné of Sleigh's paintings.

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Nochlin, "Some Women Realists: Painters of the Figure," *Arts Magazine* 48, no. 4 (December 1973–January 1974).

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Sleigh, Undated statement, in: *Sylvia Sleigh papers*, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.