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Present in His Own Life

Billy Sullivan: An artist who has found his place

By JZ Holden

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The artist Billy Sullivan is sitting in his East End studio of 30 years, located in a modern house with a Zen fish pond flush against a huge floorto-ceiling window facing the garden.

The sounds of running water and his partner pattering upstairs can be heard. Mr. Sullivan faces straight ahead, his aquiline nose in profile, as he examines the three paintings in progress hanging on the wall. On this warm summer morning, he is wearing khaki shorts and a teeshirt. His current one-man show at Guild Hall in East Hampton, his participation in the 2006 Whitney Biennial, and countless other shows around the world have not changed his grounded down-to-earth quality, nor his air of serenity.

This morning, Mr. Sullivan is accompanied by his French bulldog Ralph, who in turn is accompanied by a Cairn terrier called Eddy, which is his wife Amy's dog; they are having a doggie playdate.

The artist's shock of wavy hair is so perfectly streaked with gray, the lines so artfully distributed, that it looks as if they were painted on by David Hockney, resembling waves in one of his swimming pools. As he glances away from his work for a moment, his clear blue eyes, tinged with sadness, offer a glimpse of what he might have seen when he painted his most recent self-portrait.

The air of relaxation that permeates the house is somewhat deceiving. Mr. Sullivan is energetic and highly disciplined. "I wake up early," he says, "by 7 at the latest. By 9 o'clock I'm responding to e-mail. I start working at 10 a.m., and work in my studio until 4 p.m. At 4 p.m., I force myself to go swimming. I take the dogs to the beach at 6 p.m. Then I come back and have dinner."

In a schedule that is so regimented, what role, if any, does inspiration play in the artist's creative process?

"On a really good day, I'll do a drawing in the morning, and paint in the afternoon," the artist says. "Each painting," he continues, referring to the three on the wall before him, "has its own story and time line. It will tell you when it is done."

Pointing to one of the images, he says, "I'm playing with whites and color now. This is as good as it gets," and he laughs. "Since '97 and '98, I've started going back, and now I am making paintings from photos of that time. I started using old photographs, images that I hadn't processed at the time ... I go back into it and it lets me have the psychological time with myself about the moment in which I took the photograph."

Mr. Sullivan grew up in Brooklyn. "My parents were open and sweet. I have an early memory of going to the art supply store, Arthur Brown at 46 West 57th Street, with my parents, to buy the John Nagy kit. I attended parochial school; there was no art."

"By the ninth grade," he says, smiling, "I started attending The School of Art and Design. A teacher, Daisy Alden, she was a poet ... she took me under her wing. It was a great place, all these teachers really opened you up. It was difficult, and it was interesting."

Mr. Sullivan knew he was going to be an artist from the time he was small. "My mother was Italian and my father was Irish," he says, recalling his childhood. "There was always lots of good food and laughter. My mother came from a big family. My father worked on Wall Street, at Smith Barney. They were always supportive and loving."

“When I went to college, they asked me what I was doing. I told them I was studying advertising production. I got a scholarship to Visual Arts. My father would have liked me to become a fireman or a policeman. They just wanted me to be secure.”

“My mother knew the importance of career,” he continues. “She worked, her sisters didn’t. There was lots of support and yet, I had freedom from family because both my parents worked. I’m lucky. I got to live my dream.”

When Mr. Sullivan arrived at The School of Visual Arts, he was truly in the right place at the right time.

“Malcolm Morley was fabulous,” he says. “The thing about SVA was, there were real artists teaching there. It was a very comfortable place and you could see that it was possible to do this. Cookie Mueller said, ‘You’re a diarist.’ And all we ever did was hang out at The Factory and document how fabulous we all were.

“I started painting my family, my clients and my kids. I had a boy muse, and a girl muse. We tape recorded our conversations. When I went to a club, I remembered to take a camera. When I started going out with my wife, Amy, Gerard Malanga wrote me a poem called ‘The Beatle Calendar.’ Amy and I have two sons. The oldest, Max, died two years ago in a paragliding accident. Sam, who is the younger son, works in real estate in New York City. He is finding his way.”

A drawing of Max Sullivan hangs in a corner of the studio. “Everything was starting to happen,” Mr. Sullivan recalls. “He was so proud of me. When it happened, he was just coming into his own. He went out west. He said he was sold. He went to Boulder to finish school and he’d call up and talk about the book he was reading, and boy was he good at it. He could write, and he could draw. He is very present in my life.”

The creative process that Mr. Sullivan describes, of going back to an earlier time through a photograph, and allowing himself to experience that moment now, years later, could be seen as resembling a writer’s process when piecing together a story.

He nods in agreement. “I’m a diarist,” he says, “and I love to read: Richard Price, Coetzee, Joe LeSueur’s dissertations on Frank O’Hara, Jimmy Schuyler, who was a poet/art critic ... Being in that moment ...” The artist is quite animated as he speaks, his arms and hands constantly moving. Yet he seems extremely self-contained.

“I am very present in my life,” he says. “I like who I am. That helps.”

“Figuring out who I was,” he says, referring to his evolving sexuality, “was a slow process. I’m pretty happy with who I am, and where I am right now.” “It’s kind of like that James Brown song, ‘Jump Back and Kiss Yourself!’” he says, eyes filled with humor. And he laughs out loud. While Ralph barks.



East End artist Billy Sullivan in his East Hampton studio. DANA SHAW



Artist Billy Sullivan at work on one of his paintings. DANA SHAW