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IN BRIEF THE CRITICS' TABLE ART

Feminist Nudes, Evil Flowers, and Musical Notation: Three Critics on What to See in New York this March

A.V. Marraccini writes on Christine Sun Kim's Whitney triumph, Wendy Vogel picks Sylvia Sleigh's male odalisques, and John Vincler loves a goth-antiquarian group show.

March 5, 2025



Sylvia Sleigh, *Double Image: Paul Rosano*, 1974. Photography by Steven Probert. Image courtesy of the Estate of Sylvia Sleigh and Ortuzar.

Sylvia Sleigh

Ortuzar | 5 White Street

Through April 5, 2025

Sylvia Sleigh (1916–2010) called herself “in some ways, very traditional.” It was a droll remark from the Welsh-born artist who settled in New York in 1961, as she is known for her women’s lib-era paintings of male nudes. It’s true that she borrowed compositional strategies from earlier centuries, reworking historical paintings with groovy figures from her social circle. But she used art history—and tradition—to make space for feminist imagery that sexist detractors would deem too marginal or risqué. “Every Leaf is Precious” at Ortuzar, her first New York solo exhibition in 15 years, focuses less on her art-historical remakes than on her signature portraits, which are full of tan lines, fuzzy body hair, and backdrops of riotous pattern and color. Sleigh’s style melded Realism with sumptuous detail, elaborating the individuality of her sitters’ bodies and their environments.

Her lounging, sensitive men especially reflect the changing mores of her time. And, as much as they telegraph ’70s feminism, they foreshadow 21st-century figurative practices that recast gender norms (think Louis Fratino’s scenes of queer domesticity). Sleigh’s frequent model Paul Rosano—a slim, hirsute man with a crown of curls—is the primary embodiment of a new, post-sexual revolution masculinity. In paintings from the mid-to-late ’70s, he appears luxuriating in the buff like an odalisque; sporting denim short-shorts in the artist’s garden; and in a double nude portrait that shows his front and back, posed with his hand resting seductively on his upper thigh. This last work drew ire from a judge when exhibited at the Bronx County Courthouse in 1975. “I don’t see why male genitals are more sacred than female,” Sleigh responded.

She didn’t shy away from showing it all, but, occasionally, she winked at what could be hidden in plain sight. In the earliest canvas on view, *At the Café*, 1950, the exhibition’s ostensibly most sexually innocuous vignette, Sleigh depicts herself with her partner Lawrence Alloway, dressed in restaurant finery. The decorum depicted here is a ruse, however: She painted the scene in their love nest while they were in the midst of an affair. (The couple would marry in 1954.) Anticipating her bolder statements of the decades to come, the work—a sly portrait of her male paramour—shows her already turning the tables on an age-old artistic tradition. —*Wendy Vogel*