

ARTFORUM

June 1, 2025

REVIEWS NEW YORK

Sylvia Sleigh

Ortuzar Projects

By Daniel Belasco 𐄂

A Sylvia Sleigh (1916–2010) exhibition is a joy to behold. The warmth radiating from her affectionately painted group portraits, nudes, and landscapes helps us to visualize a harmonious pastoral utopia. These images have become textbook examples of feminist art that cleverly and unabashedly subverts the male gaze. It's a mystery to me why a triumph like *Annunciation: Paul Rosano*, 1975, isn't hanging in the permanent collection of a major museum somewhere. The standing life-size figure in cutoff short-shorts and unbuttoned shirt is a hirsute earth angel in an enclosed garden, stirring the viewer with penetrating oversize eyes and a face haloed by a magnificent corona of curls. Rosano devoted his body to Sleigh's fantasies of postmodern painting, becoming something like Victorine Meurent—Manet's favorite model—in enabling the artist to pursue her Edenic vision of people liberated from patriarchal shame and stereotypes.

The exhibition at Ortuzar Projects presented thirteen paintings made primarily between the late 1960s and early '80s—Sleigh's heyday. A small early work, *At the Café*, 1950, is a clever self-portrait that also features the artist's elegantly attired lover (and future husband), Lawrence Alloway, who became her model and muse. This handsome canvas displays some of Sleigh's abiding thematic and formal interests, such as profile views, oversize figures, and intimacies. The most recent work here, *Sean Pratt as Dorante from "The Game of Love and Chance,"* 1996, offered a demurely costumed harlequin reflected in a mirror. As in many of Sleigh's paintings, the man's head is positioned at the very top edge of the picture. With her nudes, however, it is the subject's genitals that usually receive pride of place, demanding our attention.

Like many artists of her generation, Sleigh had a bone to pick with art history. She unsubtly revised centuries of sexism by regendering conventional genres of Western painting. *Imperial Nude: Paul Rosano*, 1977, a male odalisque on a radiant orange couch, seems to be her riposte to the decorative femininity of Frederic Leighton's 1895 canvas *Flaming June*. The largest work in the show, *Court of Pan (After Luca Signorelli)*, 1973, measuring 78 by 115 inches, was a fulsome allegorical reverie that presents five nude men and an unclothed woman in a bucolic landscape. The canvas pays tribute to late-period Cézanne and, of course, the titular Roman deity

and Renaissance painter. *Court of Pan* was the sole example of Sleigh's group portraiture—a high point in the artist's representations of communal amity (though a more grandiose example might be the fourteen-panel, seventy-foot-long *Invitation to a Voyage: The Hudson River at Fishkill*, 1979–99, now in the collection of the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, New York).

Is Sleigh's art too pleasing, too easy to like? Compared to that of some of her female peers, the artist's output lacks, say, the confrontational eroticism of a Joan Semmel or the intense emotionality of a Juanita McNeely. And for all her attention to surface detail, Sleigh does not possess the old-master chops of latter-day figurative painters such as John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage. In terms of content, one could give these works a hard read and lament their reification of gender binaries and whiteness, even as they capture a downtown art scene that appears both politically and sexually liberated. But such responses minimize the audacious benevolence of Sleigh's project and her generous deconstructions of heteronormativity.

The title of Sleigh's exhibition, "Every leaf is precious," underscored how the artist devoted as much sensuous attention to flowers and foliage as she did to her subjects' tan lines and thigh hair. The riot of naturalistically painted flora in apartments and fecund courtyard gardens persists as an object of desire in our increasingly domesticated, screen-based lives. Yet for all the love that the Welsh artist gave to her adopted community of painters and critics in Manhattan, the city has been slow to reciprocate such fondness—this was her first solo exhibition in New York since 2009. I expect more will follow.



Sylvia Sleigh, *Annunciation: Paul Rosano*, 1975, oil on canvas, 90 1/8 × 52 1/4".