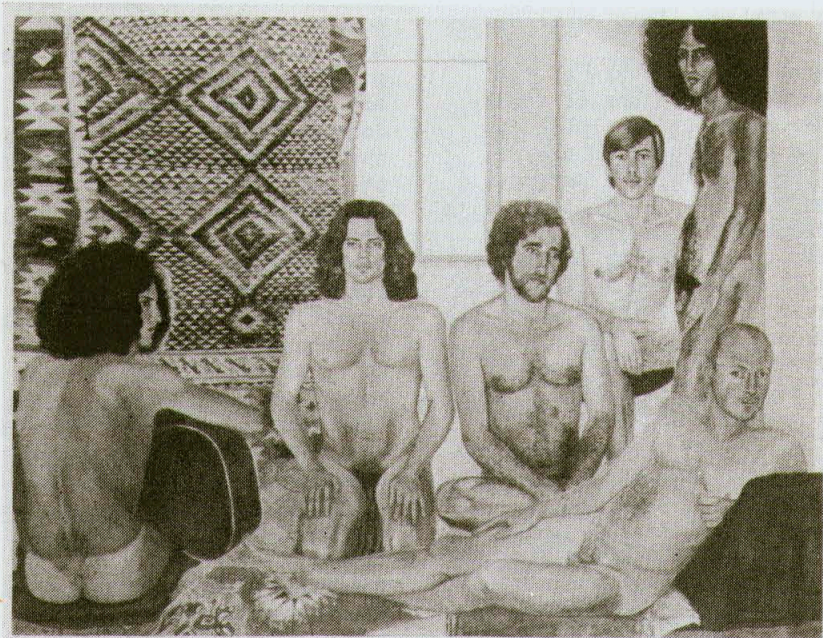


The Turkish Bath, 1973



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Sylvia Sleigh's portraits entwine a celebration of the beauties of the physical world with trenchant social criticism. Augmenting a lifetime's interest in portraiture with a feminist's outrage at the centuries of widespread discrimination against competent women artists, Sleigh's work in the last few years has sometimes taken aim at certain longstanding traditions. Most obviously, she is one of the first artists to reintroduce with any boldness the male nude into contemporary portraiture.

Although well aware of the numerous depictions of female nudes as mindless erotic objects to be found in the art of the past, Sleigh generously does not seek retribution. With a respect for nudity akin to that of the ancient Greeks, she is interested in the whole person, a portrait in which the body and soul are one. Her subjects are frankly sensual but not deprived of their individuality or their dignity.

Often Sleigh communicates her revisionist message with witty reference to the works of earlier painters. Here, for example, her title The Turkish Bath is a direct translation of Ingres' Le Bain Turc which despite the indisputable magnitude of its achievement has been called a "hedonistic wallow". Sleigh replaces the masses of Ingres' exquisite but vapid chattel with four art critics - Scott Burton, John Perreault, Carter Ratcliff, and Lawrence Alloway - and brackets them with two views of her favorite model, Paul Rosano.

That the scene was constructed and painted by a woman is still an unusual enough event at this moment in time to add an extra dimension to our reading of the painting. The irony of the iconography is nearly without precedent. Men of considerable influence sit, kneel and recline passively in a group. The

state of undress heightens their vulnerability. The tables are turned. The creative force and the power to control the situation are here in the hands of a woman. The painting stands as a challenge to any remnant notions of a "weaker sex".

This challenge is done, however, with a deftness and a compassion that does not disadvantage the sitters. For Sleigh it is portraiture not polemics that is paramount. She has chosen to paint the people she cares about and that caring is obvious in the painting itself. The friends are alert and self-possessed. John Perreault's face, perhaps the most arresting passage in the painting, seems to radiate from an invisible nimbus. Only with the figures of Paul Rosano are there suggestions of indolence and a languid sensuality. Painted twice, flanking the others, the contrast is clear and not unexpected. Rosano is the one personality selected by the artist for the beauty of his physical presence.

In Annunciation: Paul Rosano Sleigh excels in affirming the spiritual nature of the physical world. The model stands at the edge of the artist's city garden. The artist takes special interest in stylizing the pattern of certain details. The model's hair, illuminated by sunlight, becomes a foliage-like crown. Both the model and the garden are at the height of physical perfection.

Born in Llandudno, North Wales, Sleigh remembers a reproduction of Boticelli's Primavera hanging in her bedroom. She attended the Brighton School of Art in Sussex in her late 'teens. In her early twenties she resolved a crisis of self-confidence (a crisis heightened by the failure of those around her to take the ambition and talent of a woman artist

seriously) by pawning a piece of jewelry in order to purchase a painting by an unrecognized woman painter. In 1961 she moved to the United States. She presently lives in New York City and is an active member of A.I.R., the woman's cooperative gallery.

AMK

Works in MATRIX:

The Turkish Bath (Portraits of Paul Rosano, Scott Burton, John Perreault, Carter Ratcliff and Lawrence Alloway), 1973, oil on canvas, 76" x 102". Lent by A.I.R. Gallery, New York City.

Annunciation: Paul Rosano, 1975, oil on canvas, 90" x 52". Lent by A.I.R. Gallery, New York City.

...portraits are really and truly what most interest me. You see, if I paint anything, it's a portrait of it - a fish, a flower, anything. I feel very strongly when I see something particularly lovely that I want to record it, forever, so other people will see the beauty of it...

I hardly ever paint people unless I'm rather in love with them. ...they sit for five hours, or months perhaps, and if you don't like your subject how awful. I choose sitters for their rapport with me... I like to paint people at their best - at what they think their best is too, if I can. Why not? That's the most lovely side of them... I like to paint young people ...I think it's terribly difficult to paint someone young... to get the skin fresh... skin that's luminous. That's like trying to capture the look of flowers.

...one day, someone said, "You know, you have Flemish detail." And I remembered how much I adored van Eyck and the Ghent Altarpiece. But Giorgione was always my great favorite - because of the enigma and mystery of his painting. What one wants to have is that sort of... ambiguity.

Sylvia Sleigh
In an interview with Gerrit Henry, May 1975.

Selected one-woman exhibitions:
Trafford Gallery, London '62
(first); Bennington College,
Vermont '63; Hemingway Galleries,
NYC '68, '69, '71; Soho 20, NYC
'74; Mabel Smith Douglass Li-
brary (Women Artists Series) New
Brunswick, New Jersey '74;
A.I.R. Gallery, NYC '74, '76;
State University of Ohio, Colum-
bus '76; Deson Zaks Gallery,
Chicago '76.

Selected group exhibitions:
Vassar College Art Gallery,
Poughkeepsie, Realism Now '68;
Kunsthhaus, Hamburg, American
Women Artists '72; New York
Cultural Center, NYC, Women
Choose Women '73; School of
the Visual Arts, NYC, The Male
Nude '73; Indianapolis Museum
of Art, Painting and Sculpture
Today '74; Civic Center, Phila-
delphia, Women's Work - American
Art '74; Tokyo International
Biennale, New Images in Paint-
ing '74; New York Cultural
Center, Three Centuries of the
American Nude '75.

Selected statements by Sleigh:
Art-Rite 5, Spring '74, p. 6.
Anonymous Was a Woman, Calif-
ornia Institute of the Arts
(Valencia) '74, p. 119+.
(See below Gerrit Henry, "Ten
Portraits")
"Views from the Studio," Art
News, vol. 75, no. 4 (May 1976),
p. 32.

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Letter," Art International, vol.
9, no. 4 (May '65), p. 34+.

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(February '71), p. 53.

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Nochlin, eds., Woman as Sex
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week (New York) '72, p. 14+.

Henry, Gerrit. "Reviews and
Previews," Art News, vol. 72,
no. 10 (December '73), p. 100.

Russel, John. Sylvia Sleigh:
New Paintings (Catalogue), May
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Realists: Painters of the
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Mayer, Rosemary. "Review of
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vol. 62, no. 6 (November Decem-
ber '74), pp. 120+.

Henry, Gerrit. "Ten Port-
raitists - Interviews/Statements,"
Art in America, vol. 63, no. 1
(January February '75), p. 34+.

Hess, Thomas B. "Sitting
Prettier," New York Magazine,
vol. 9, no. 8 (February 23, 1976)
p. 62+.