Groundbreaking

The Women of the Sylvia Sleigh Collection

Rowan University Art Gallery
August 29–October 1, 2011
Sylvia Sleigh: Artist and Collector

The Sylvia Sleigh Collection is comprised of nearly one hundred paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, and photographs by women artists. It was amassed by Sylvia Sleigh (1916–2010), a pioneering feminist who became well-known in the 1970s for her paintings of nude men. She challenged the tradition in which male artists depicted anonymous, idealized, and often eroticized female models. While she unashamedly reveled in the beauty of the human body, Sleigh refused to objectify her sitters, embracing their individuality instead. Her subjects are identified by name and their physical features, such as body hair or freckles, are retained (fig. 1).

Sleigh was among the founding members of SOHO 20 Gallery (est. 1973), an important women’s cooperative, as were Barbara Coleman, Joan Glueckman, Cynthia Mailman, Lucy Sallick, Rosalind Shaffer, Eileen Spikol, and Sharon Wybrants, all of whom are represented in the Sylvia Sleigh Collection. She subsequently joined A.I.R. Gallery (est. 1972), the first artist-run exhibition space for women in the United States, which counted Dotty Attie (one of its founders), Judith Bernstein, Blythe Bohnen, and Rosemary Mayer among its original members.

In this vital period of change, Sleigh was actively involved in exhibitions of work by women, participated in protests of patriarchal

Fig. 1. Sylvia Sleigh, *Portrait of an Actor: Sean Pratt*, 1994, oil on canvas, 42½ × 56 in., Rowan University Art Gallery, Sylvia Sleigh Collection.
museum practices, and provided encouragement for younger artists. She also collaborated with twelve other women to create *The Sister Chapel* (1974–78), a nonhierarchical celebration of female role models, which was conceived by Ilise Greenstein (1928–1985) (fig. 2). Works by five of the other participants – Martha Edelheit, Shirley Gorelick, Diana Kurz, Cynthia Mailman, and Sharon Wybrants – are also found in the Sylvia Sleigh Collection.

Although she was a tireless supporter of women artists, Sleigh was unable to collect their work seriously before the death of her husband, Lawrence Alloway (1926–1990). He was concerned that such acquisitions might compromise his professional integrity as an art critic and curator. Nevertheless, he and Sleigh sometimes received gifts from other artists, as attested by the personalized inscriptions on several works in the collection (cats. 11, 13, 18, 28, 35, and 46).

Through gifts, exchanges, and purchases, Sleigh accumulated a substantial and varied private collection. For many years, the art of her contemporaries could be found throughout her home in Manhattan. Works by Betty Parsons, Phyllis Rosser, and Paula Tavins hung near the sofa where she routinely sat to read *The New York Times*, talk on the telephone, or visit with a friend (fig. 3). In the hall were two paintings by Rhea Sanders and a work by Louise Weinberg. Eileen Spikol’s sculpture was in her nearby bedroom (fig. 4). In the stairwell, she displayed paintings by Marion Lerner-Levine, Selina Trieff, and Stephanie Rauschenbusch. Elsewhere in the
house were works by Freda Wadsworth, Sabra Moore, Diana Kurz, Linda Bastian, Rosemary Mayer, and Phyllis Janto.

In order to encourage the artists and publicize their accomplishments, Sleigh exhibited fifty-four works from her collection in “Parallel Visions” at SOHO 20 Gallery in 1999. Of that group, forty-four are currently in the inaugural exhibition at Rowan University, accompanied by eighteen works that did not appear in “Parallel Visions.” Two of the absent works – Elisa Decker’s David (1987) and Nancy Spero’s Codex Artaud II (1971) – were no longer in Sleigh’s collection by the time it was gifted to the Rowan University Art Gallery. A third, Nancy Holt’s untitled composition of black-and-white photographs (c. 1972), is presently on loan for a major retrospective, “Nancy Holt: Sightlines,” which originated at Columbia University’s Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery and is now traveling to several venues in Europe and the United States.

The premiere of the Sylvia Sleigh Collection at Rowan University features approximately two-thirds of the works. For reasons of space, conservation, and cohesiveness, some parts of the collection could not be exhibited. In many cases, Sleigh owned two or more works by the same individual; thus, it was possible to reduce the number of objects on display without omitting artists. Notably absent from the exhibition, however, are an untitled print (1961) by Pat Adams, which is too fragile to display; Jacqueline Livingston’s Photographposter Mail Exhibition

![Fig. 3. Interior of Sylvia Sleigh’s residence with Betty Parsons’ Gate (cat. 41), Phyllis Rosser’s Before Night Falls (cat. 44), and Paula Tavins’ Untitled (cat. 53).](image-url)
(1979), a group of fourteen unframed posters that could not be shown effectively in the available space; and three small etchings by Felicity Rainnie, which were only recently rediscovered in Sleigh’s estate.

It was Sylvia Sleigh’s intention to donate her collection to an institution that would preserve the work and make it accessible through periodic exhibitions. She acquired the works of other women as a way of supporting them and honoring their achievements, regardless of whether they were critically acclaimed or financially successful. With the Sylvia Sleigh Collection as its foundation, the permanent collection of the Rowan University Art Gallery will be supplemented in the same spirit, with particular emphasis on the works of women who were active in the pivotal period of the 1970s and 1980s.

Andrew D. Hottle, Ph.D.
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Fig. 4. Interior of Sylvia Sleigh’s residence with Eileen Spikol’s Enigma (cat. 51).
Checklist of the Exhibition

* Illustrated in the “Parallel Visions” catalogue

The following information is based on recent research, which has yielded a number of titles and dates that were not readily available when the “Parallel Visions” catalogue was published in 1998. Numbers 1–62 are part of the Sylvia Sleigh Collection.

Cecile Abish (b. 1930)

2. Study for Declination. 1972. Vinyl, kraft paper, and Dyna Core panel. 15 × 20 in.*

Anne Abrons (b. 1950)

Dotty Attie (b. 1938)

Helène Aylon (b. 1931)

Roseanne Backstedt (1941–2008)

Emily Barnett

Linda Bastian
Judith Bernstein (b. 1942)

Elizabeth Bisbing
Painted paper collage. 5¼ × 4¼ in.

Blythe Bohnen (b. 1940)

Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010)

Diane Burko (b. 1945)

Ann Chernow (b. 1936)
Lithograph on paper. 27¾ × 21½ in.*

Barbara Coleman (b. 1937)

Rosalyn Drexler (b. 1926)
17. Emilio Meets the Enchantress. 1968. Offset lithograph on paper. 11 × 11 in.*
Martha Nilsson Edelheit

Audrey Flack (b. 1931)

Ruth Ann Fredenthal

Joan Glueckman (1940–1978)

Shirley Gorelick (1924–2000)

Nancy Grossman (b. 1940)

Jane Henry (b. 1953)

Phyllis Janto
Lila Katzen (1925–1998)

Irene Krugman (1925–1982)

Diana Kurz (b. 1936)
30. Portrait of Sylvia Sleigh at 80. 1996. Oil on canvas. 72 × 36 in.

Bibi Lenček

Marion Lerner-Levine (b. 1931)
32. Long May They Reign. 1975. Watercolor and graphite on paper. 15 × 20½ in.*
33. Memory of the Coronation, 1937. 1978. Watercolor and graphite on paper. 4 × 6 in.

Jill Mackie
34. Red Hibiscus. 1989. Oil on paper. 5 × 7 in.*
Cynthia Mailman (b. 1942)
35. Study for God. 1976. Graphite and acrylic on paper. 9½ × 5¾ in. (image).*

Rosemary Mayer (b. 1943)

Katherine Miller (1892–1971)
38. Landscape. Ca. 1932. Oil on panel with painted frame. 11 × 13 in.*

Sabra Moore (b. 1943)

Vernita Nemec, a.k.a. Vernita N’Cognita

Betty Parsons (1900–1982)
41. Gate. 1967. Driftwood and acrylic. 15¼ × 11 × 1 in.*

Stephanie Rauschenbusch (b. 1942)
42. Homage to Balthus. 1981. Oil on canvas. 30 × 24 in.*
Ce Roser
43. *Double Vision*. 1991. Oil on canvas. $56\frac{3}{4} \times 30\frac{3}{4}$ in.*

Phyllis Rosser (b. 1934)
44. *Before Night Falls*. 1991. Driftwood and acrylic. $48 \times 89 \times 10$ in.*

Lucy Sallick (b. 1937)
46. *Pencils, Pencils*. 1978. Lithograph on paper. $3\frac{7}{8} \times 4\frac{7}{8}$ in. (image).

Rhea Sanders (b. 1923)
47. *Inside-Outsde, Karolyi Stone House, Vence*. 1989. Egg tempera on wood. $29\frac{1}{2} \times 21\frac{1}{2}$ in.*

Lisa Schwartzberg (b. 1948)
48. *Dreamscape #2*. 1995. Mixed media construction. $6\frac{1}{2} \times 4 \times 2$ in.*

Rosalind Shaffer
49. *Scourge* (maquette). 1982. Conté crayon on paper, mounted on wood with glass. $11\frac{3}{8} \times 17\frac{3}{4}$ in.*

Susan Sills

Eileen Spikol (1938–2011)
51. *Enigma*. Undated. Hydrocal and pigment. $20 \times 28 \times 8$ in.*

Michelle Stuart (b. 1933)

Paula Tavins (b. 1939)
53. Untitled. 1975. Canvas with acrylic and stitching. $14\frac{1}{2} \times 11\frac{1}{2}$ in.*

Selina Trieff (b. 1934)
54. *Head*. 1985. Oil and gold leaf on paper. $7 \times 10$ in.*
Audrey Ushenko (b. 1945)
55. **Perseus and Medusa II.** 1993. Oil on canvas. 36 × 24 in.*

Pegeen Vail, called Pegeen Guggenheim (1926–1967)
56. **Nativity.** 1956. Gouache on paper. 19¾ × 25¾ in.*

Freda Wadsworth (1918–2003)

Marjorie Wadsworth (d. 2001)

Marie Warsh

Louise Weinberg
60. **Heart’s Lake.** 1997. Ink and beeswax on copper over wood. 16¼ × 14¼ in.*

Jacqueline Wray
61. **Blue Ridge Spring #1.** 1992. Oil pencil on paper. 26 × 40 in.*

Sharon Wybrants (b. 1943)
Selections from *The Sister Chapel*

**Alice Neel** (1900–1984)


**Sylvia Sleigh** (1916–2010)


**Sharon Wybrants** (b. 1943)
