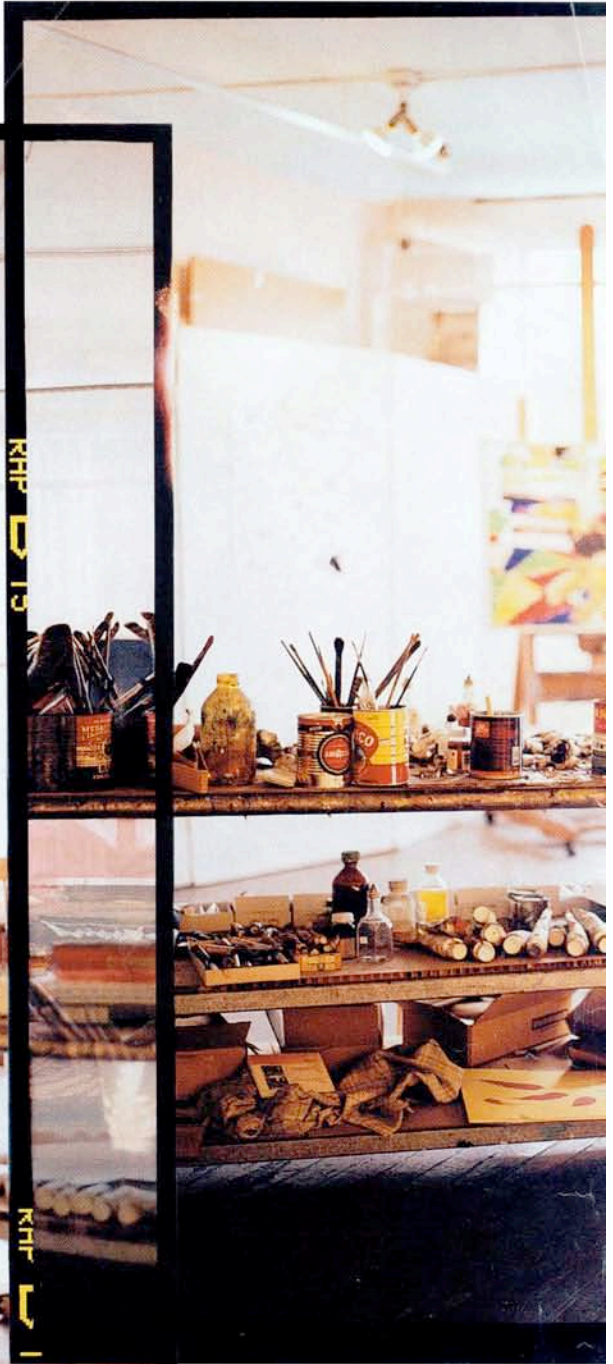
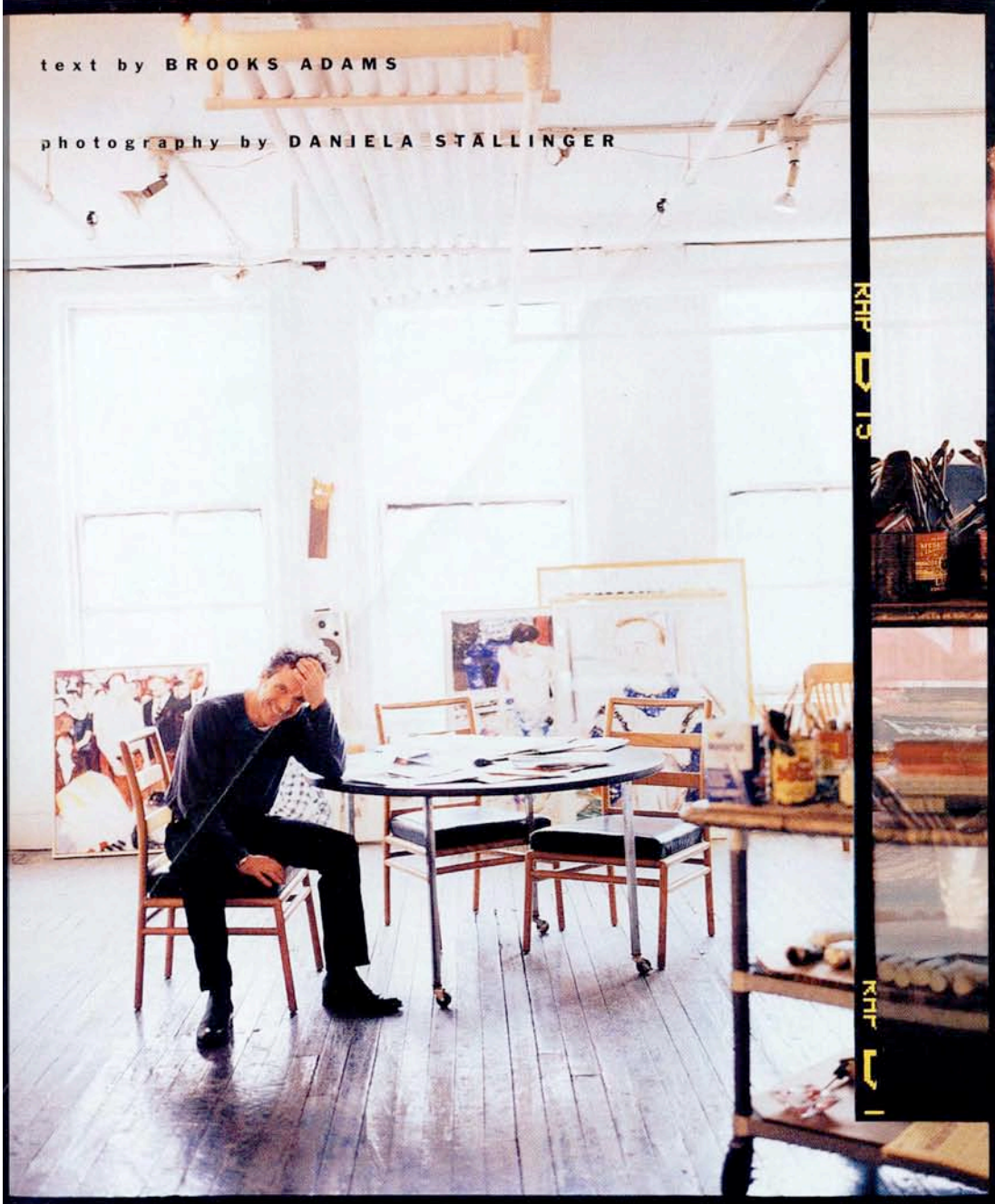


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billysullivan
Urban realism with a light touch



Billy Sullivan in his Manhattan studio. Above: A 1996 pastel of writer Gary Indiana. See Resources.

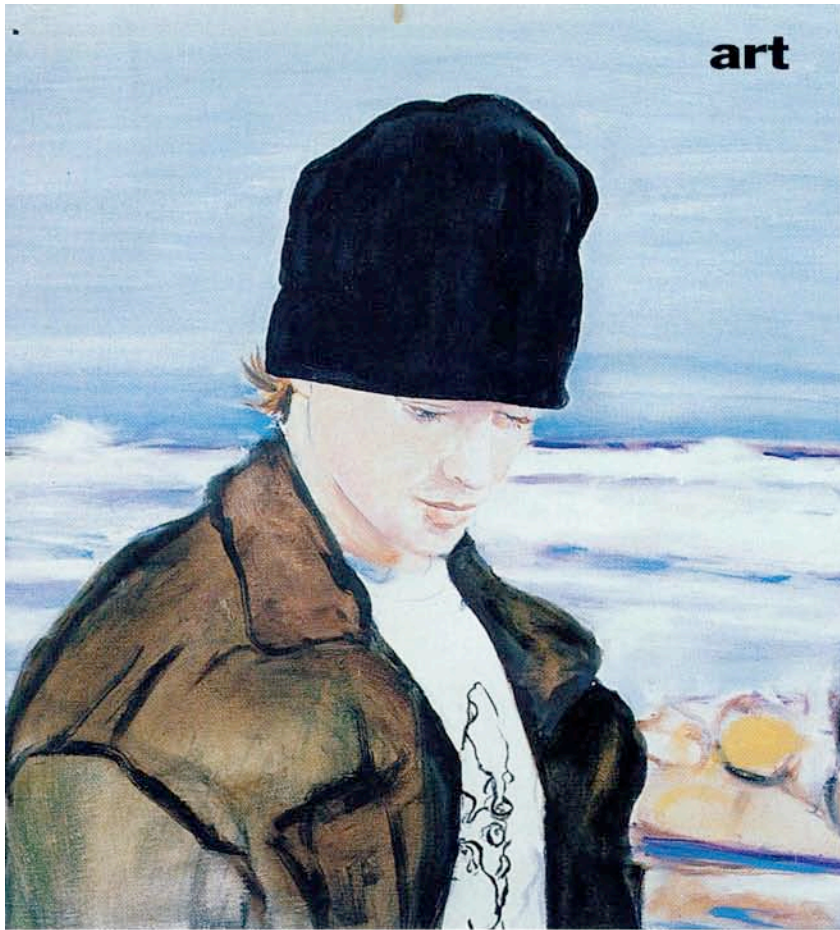
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My work has always been a sort of diary," Billy Sullivan says as he buzzes around his Manhattan loft, an expansive space on the Bowery in the middle of Chinatown. As usual, he's a flurry of activity, wrapping a painting, sending an assistant out for supplies, editing slides for a book project. A handsome man with dark curly hair, Sullivan, who is in his early 50s, looks more puckish than ever, smirking

and chortling as he comes across slides of cohorts from the 1970s. In a flash he's off to the other end of the loft to use his new scanner. "This is a great way to work: I put in a slide, and I get this," he says, brandishing an almost instantaneous color print. "It's the silkscreen of the '90s."

Computer printing adds to the already rich portrait fodder that is the very stuff of Sullivan's bohemian encyclopedia. ▸

art



Who else would paint a Helmut Lang show as if it were a courtroom drama?



Left to right: *Sam*, 1997 (oil on canvas; 24"x25"); *Four Birds with Robin*, 1997 (oil on canvas; 30"x42").

His work has always been handmade and immediate yet plugged into the latest consumer technology. Now he's making little hand-folded books out of his computer-printed images. After the fax, which he still uses to transmit his calligraphic drawings, the scanner has brought a new level of freedom to his fresh and improvisational art.

Whether portraits of porn stars or bouquets in a Hollywood hotel room, his blowsy pastels and oils have always been directly based on photography. Since the '60s he has traced visuals from slides; increasingly, though, he is interested in more subtle mixes of hand-drawn and photographic elements. "This is the direction my portraits are taking," he says, proffering a red hardbound volume with an embossed cover. It's like a newfangled, limited-edition scrapbook—an aggregate as opposed to an iconic image—exploding in color photography and

pastel and ink drawings. Commissioned by the father of two young children, it's similar in feel to the free-form, bulletin-board installations of graphics, framed and unframed, that the artist does on the walls of his studio, in collectors' houses, and in galleries such as Regen Projects in Los Angeles (where he had a show last June) and Fischbach in New York, where he has shown since 1986.

Sullivan, who grew up in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn, was introduced to art in a roundabout way: through his asthma doctor in Manhattan. "He asked if I liked to draw and suggested I apply to the brand-new High School of Art and Design, right around the corner," remembers the artist. "I ended up being in the first graduating class." In the early '60s, Sullivan's life revolved around the emerging discotheque culture of the East 50s. "When Arthur's opened, I

went every night. Then I got into Parsons School of Design, when it was located over by the river on 54th Street." Next it was Ondine, "the club underneath the 59th Street Bridge, where Jim Morrison and Jimi Hendrix performed. I would stay out till dawn and crawl through the window at home just as my father was shaving for work."

After getting a scholarship to the School of Visual Arts, he worked briefly as a studio assistant for the artist Malcolm Morley, who was then painting in the Photo-Realist idiom. "I drew grids, and he told great stories," says Sullivan. Soon he was married to Amy Goodman, a pretty club kid from a prosperous Long Island family, and was off on a round-the-world honeymoon. "We bought Afghani coats on Carnaby Street and then trudged with them to India and Japan."

However picaresque his early adventures, Sullivan insists his art educa-▷



Sullivan insists his art education
 “began with **Andy Warhol**”



Left to right: *Hydrangeas*, 1997 (pastel on paper; 42"x30"); *Dave and Archie*, 1997 (pastel on paper; 30"x42").

tion “began with Andy Warhol.” He and Amy went to Max’s Kansas City every night, where they met other young couples in the Warhol circle, such as the poet René Ricard and his wife, Patsy. “We were in Max’s back room,” says Sullivan. “Andy would ask us to come over to the table, and we did.” In the summer of ’71, the artist went to London to design the sets for Warhol’s now almost forgotten play *Pork*: “There were stark white panels and Deco furniture. Everyone looked like cartoons. It brought nudity and drag queens to the Roundhouse Theater.”

Sullivan’s early-’70s work was a novel form of portraiture. He went through a phase of using an air gun to create likenesses of Taylor Mead and Genevieve Waite. He fabricated sculptural installations in the duplex studio of his rented West Side townhouse,

where he’d “make people get undressed, trace them on paper, seal the tracings in plastic, and then hang them up on a clothes rack.” The artist’s portraits usually focused on the performatory: his first New York show, at the now-defunct Kornblee Gallery in 1978, featured pastels of the Parisian fashion world; his second exhibition was inspired by a trip to Brazil for Carnival.

Throughout the ’80s and into the early ’90s, he developed an underground reputation as an urban realist with a light touch, a painter of go-go boys in leather bars as well as uptown matrons and fluffy dogs. By this time Sullivan was sharing his life with writer and curator Klaus Kertess. In 1995, *The New York Times Magazine* asked him to sketch the runway collections in Milan, Paris, and New York, which resulted in a buoyant six pages of pastel illustrations, a definite

departure in the world of fashion journalism. Who else would paint a Helmut Lang show as if it were a courtroom drama, with a fey male model being led in by a group of burly bodyguards?

Sullivan finally “went Hollywood” in 1996, when he shipped 40 drawings and paintings to the West Coast and then reworked them for use in the movie *As Good As It Gets*. He gave drawing lessons to Greg Kinnear, who played a young gay painter whose “work” was actually Sullivan’s. “I kept telling him to move his hands more,” the artist recalls, gesticulating frantically in mock resignation. The actor Skeet Ulrich, who portrayed a male hustler in the movie, came in character on a visit to the artist’s Bowery studio. “He was great,” says Sullivan. “And Sony even let him keep the portrait I made of him.” ★