

The Heart of a Post-Modern Hudson River Painter

Portrait of Bill Sullivan • Retrospective in Albany, June 22-August 13

Philip Alvarez

The Autobiography of Bill Sullivan, by Jaime Manrique, (Hudson, New York, The Groundwater Press, 2006), was recently published in conjunction with an upcoming retrospective exhibition of Bill Sullivan's paintings to be held at The Albany Institute of History and Art, June 22 – Aug. 13. The Albany Institute will feature more than 60 landscape painting and span the length of his career.

Sullivan received his MFA from the University of Pennsylvania in 1968. He has had more than 15 one-man shows in New York City. His paintings are included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cleveland Museum, The Museum of the City of New York and the Albany Institute of History and Art, as well as more than 100 private collections.

Both book and exhibition reflect the life of an artist whose career spans a period of more than 40 years. In the most general terms, Sullivan is a member of the New York School whose perception and work has been influenced by a broad range of artists and writers that reads a bit like a Who's Who of Modernism. Though grounded in principles of Abstract Expressionism, Sullivan's work is also influenced by realist painters such as Fairfield Porter and Jane Freilicher, as well as Hudson River School master Frederic Church.

His subjects include landscapes in New York State such as the Hudson River, Catskill Mountains, Niagara Falls and New York City, as well as the mountains, volcanoes and waterfalls of Columbia, Ecuador and Venezuela.

It was Claes Oldenberg that gave Sullivan his start when the older artist included Sullivan's earliest paintings in group shows at Judson Gallery and Rubin Gallery, New York City, where – in addition to Oldenberg – he exhibited alongside other future luminaries Jim Dine and Red Grooms. Sullivan later attended Silvermine College of Art in New Canaan, CT, a school whose faculty was largely comprised of recent Yale Graduates who



Olana Dusk, 2005. 36 x 48 inches. Collection of Albert Roberts.

had studied with the Bauhaus's Joseph Albers. Sullivan then went on to study privately with Anni Albers, who had studied with Kandinsky and was close to Paul Klee. It was an auspicious start.

A Rise Through the Art World

Anni Albers arranged for Sullivan to meet Neil Welliver, a professor of painting at the Graduate School of Fine Arts at The University of Pennsylvania. In addition to Welliver, Sullivan's teachers there were Fairfield Porter and Jane Freilicher. During this time, Sullivan had something like an epiphany in relationship to Porter's work when he realized that an image on canvas, inspired by a photograph, "was more intensely real than what

had inspired it." (ibid p.17) Sullivan admired Jane Freilicher particularly for "her close relationship with poets, which is reflected in the tone and lyricism of her canvases." (ibid p.17)

Poets and other writers have also been important in Sullivan's life. Jaime Manrique, author of several books, most recently *Our Lives are the Rivers*, is a professor at Columbia University's MFA program in creative writing. Manrique's *Autobiography of Bill Sullivan* is an engaging work that incidentally champions Sullivan's career. Their relationship spans a significant portion of the artist's career. In fact, the genesis of some of Sullivan's most important work lay out of his friendship with Manrique.

Before the two men met, Sullivan spent nearly a



American Falls Illuminated, 1990. 78 x 58 inches. Collection of the Albany Institute of History and Art.



View From Olana, 1988. 36 x 60 inches. Collection of the Albany Institute of History and Art.



Our Lives Are the Rivers, 2005. 36 x 48 inches.



My Night with Lorca, 1992. 48 x 78 inches. Collection of the Albany Institute of History and Art.

decade finding his footing in the Manhattan of the 1960s and 1970s, where he became friendly with Alan Ginsberg, John Ashbery, Gerrit Henry and Eileen Miles. Ashbery provided a preface for *The Autobiography of Bill Sullivan*, in which he says:

"While there has been a tendency among some contemporary artists to present a revisionist view of the "great outdoors" of nineteenth-century landscape painters, Sullivan has no satirical agenda. After spending several years in South America amid landscapes that attracted Frederic Edwin Church and Martin Heade, among others, he refined and strengthened this awesome imagery after returning to New York. A certain surrealism floats through these vaporous visions of Columbia, though this may just be the result of Sullivan's careful documentation of scenes that looked unreal to begin with." (ibid, Preface).

A copy of a letter from the late Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas, following Ashbery's Preface, reiterates Sullivan's distillate and keen images when he describes:

"Bill Sullivan... paints with a masterly craft and has a talent for deciphering the meaning of nature. His landscapes of known and unknown worlds reveal realities new to us. His work is an exaltation, a desolate, yet fully realized splendor, which he renders with the serenity and wisdom of someone for whom light and color are familiar instruments used to create mystery. His roots and concerns take him from a dreamy, organic, and telluric world toward limitless horizons where the real and the magical, (intelligence and imagination), merge in perfect balance. We salute Sullivan, an excellent painter whose fervor deserves our gratitude."

In this same period he became a friend of dance critic Edwin Denby and photographer Rudy Burckhardt. Denby's book, *Dancers, Buildings and People in the Street*, and Burckhardt's photographs are considered iconic images of the Manhattan skyline. These artists informed Sullivan's perception



Bill Sullivan, 1998. Photo by James Maszle.

and his relationship to them further cemented his place as an artist in New York City. After a show at The Bowery Gallery and another through The Figurative Artists' Alliance, Sullivan "... realized my heart was in painting the figure in the landscape.... I was happy with my paintings of figures, but I was aware that the sense of place was always vague, sketchy. I decided I should develop my landscapes and somehow, never looked back." (Manrique p. 22)

A Journey Up-river

Although first drawn to paint cityscapes, he slowly expanded, "...the geographic confines of [his] world," and his search for subjects led him to the shores of the Hudson River. Sullivan recalls, "In the 1970s the abandoned elevated highway that ran down the west side of Manhattan was still standing. It was a great place to set up my easel; it afforded me good views of the city and the river." (ibid p. 23)

During the period when Sullivan first started showing his work, he often men-

tioned John Button as a New York School Realist. Button's interest in Northern European landscape painting, particularly Caspar David Friedrich, had a profound influence upon the direction of Sullivan's paintings. Button, who was also familiar with Frederic Church, knew that Church's teacher, Thomas Cole, had studied in Dusseldorf. This meant that the Hudson River School of painting was rooted in Northern European landscape painting tradition. These revelations about Romantic landscape painting in general and the Hudson River School in particular eventually coalesced into what he characterized as a "New World Vision." (ibid. p.24)

Manrique met Sullivan on July 4, 1977 and the two forged a deep friendship that has endured to this day. When Manrique told Sullivan he was from Bogotá, Colombia, he recalls, "Bill... became very animated and started telling me about a nineteenth century painter named Frederic Church, who had painted in Colombia in the 1850s... Later we wandered out into the fireworks..." (ibid. p. 25)

This was the impetus for a quixotic two-year adventure that began in 1978. Manrique had gone to Colombia where his debut novella, *El Cadaver de Papa*, was about to be published. There Sullivan joined him, determined to recreate the journey that Frederic Church made through South America.

South American Success

While in Bogotá, Sullivan achieved considerable recognition after a show at the Museum of Modern Art in Bogotá, when images taken from his artwork appeared on the front pages of *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*, the two most important Colombian newspapers. In addition to Bogotá, during their sojourn in Latin America, the two traveled to Barranquilla, Santa Marta, and Medellín, Colombia, as well as Caracas and Maracaibo in Venezuela. True to his mission, Sullivan painted subjects that Church had pictured nearly a century before, including an imposing waterfall called Tequendama and the large crater-lake Guatavita, the

source of the El Dorado legend.

In New York City again, Sullivan made many visits to Olana, the estate Frederic Church built in Hudson, NY. He realized that the view from Olana toward the Catskills overlooking the Hudson River was one of his most preferred in the northeast United States. Among the hundreds of treatments he has made of this subject, his favorite is one titled *View from Olana*, housed today in the collection of the Albany Institute of History and Art. Sullivan explains:

"The painting's blood red apocalyptic sky, reflected in the Hudson, is an homage to Church's *Twilight in the Wilderness*." While Church's painting is said to be about the bloodshed of the American Civil War, Sullivan's painting suggests, according to the artist, a nuclear disaster.

Less disturbing, but equally dramatic, is a series of paintings of Niagara Falls. These also follow in Church's footsteps, but incorporate the additional intensity of twentieth century neon light in the composition.

Sullivan says, "My ambition as an artist has been to take the painting of the New York School Realists of the generation before me to places it has never gone before... In my painting there is always a hint of the horrible, the dark side of life, and it is always overcome by a life-affirming exuberance that I see in nature. It is this edginess, this contradiction, that gives my paintings truth, I'm convinced." (ibid pp. 41-42.)

Sullivan now makes his home in Hudson, NY (Columbia County), in the heart of the Hudson Valley.

The retrospective of Sullivan's work will be held at The Albany Institute of History and Art, June 22 – Aug. 13. The Albany Institute of History & Art is located at 125 Washington Avenue, in Albany. Hours are Wednesday – Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and on Sunday from 12 - 5 p.m. Admission is \$10.

For more information call (518) 463-4478.

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