Art Reviews

Barbara Sullivan's Contemporary Art of Fresco Painting

Sullivan's frescos are original and surprising but also wry and even feisty; she both embraces and enhances the clunkiness of the medium, animating her subjects.

by Carl Little
19 hours ago

Barbara Sullivan, "Running Late," detail from *One Room Efficiency* (2001), shaped fresco installation (all photos Carl Little/Hyperallergic, unless otherwise noted)

FARMINGTON, Maine — Since learning the centuries-old technique of fresco painting while working as a cook at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in the late 1980s-early 1990s, Barbara Sullivan has turned to it to create artworks that speak to modern life. *Barbara Sullivan—Forty Plus Years: A Retrospective* features around 30 of her shaped and painted frescoes, along with nearly 40 oil paintings, all dating from 1978 to 2021.

The Italian word fresco means "fresh." The adjective fits Sullivan's wall-mounted pieces in more ways than one. Her work is original and surprising but also wry and even feisty. She both embraces and enhances the clunkiness of the medium, animating her subjects.

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On the “fresco vocabulary wall” is a mix of diverse objects, among them a French press, Greek amphora jar, turkey on a platter, and cloth iron. The curvaceous “Monhegan Lamp” (2019) harks back to Sullivan’s 2016 artist residency on the remote Maine island where kerosene lamps still provide some of the nocturnal light.

Barbara Sullivan, “Breaststroke” (2011), shaped fresco

In “Breaststroke” (2011), a swimmer is represented by her head, part of her upper torso in blue bathing suit, and an arm arched forward. She cuts across the wall, a look of furious determination on her face, her hair swept back, which adds to the dynamic. The woman seems to be swimming for her life.

In many of Sullivan’s frescoes, the figures are broken into several pieces. Although this is a means to decrease the weight of individual elements (*buon* fresco, made from wire lathe and two layers of plaster over a wood armature, can be quite heavy), it heightens the visual drama: in “Running Late” the harried woman hurrying off to work splits into four pieces, as if from the momentum of her haste. There’s humor here — her briefcase spills open, a floating frying pan with eggs adds to the amusement — but also a statement about the frenetic pace of life.

The show’s only overtly political piece, “Monsanto Gray Scale Shopping Cart” (2020), is a reprise of an earlier work, “Shopping Cart” (2009), which hangs directly above it. Sullivan gave the original cart full of brightly colored groceries what one might call an agrochemical corporate makeover. She lays the blame for the lifeless broccoli, bananas, carrots, and other items at the feet of the notorious producer of Roundup.

Barbara Sullivan, “Shopping Cart” (2009) and “Monsanto Gray Scale Shopping Cart” (2020), shaped frescos

Barbara Sullivan, 12 portraits from *Nasty Maine Women Artists* series (2016), oil on canvas

One wall of the exhibition space is devoted to an assortment of Sullivan’s oil paintings. Among them is a block of 12 small portraits from her *Nasty Maine Women Artists* series, inspired by the insult (“nasty woman”) that Trump hurled at Hillary Clinton during their debate in October 2016. The friendly visages of Katherine Bradford, Lois Dodd, Dozier Bell, Lauren Fensterstock, and their compatriots belie their “nastiness” — or brazenly embrace it.

The wall also features several self-portraits of Sullivan engaged in various everyday activities: Q-tipping her ears, brushing her teeth, applying lipstick. The tongue-in-cheek approach to these works morphs into a statement on women’s health in four 1994 portraits showing her getting a mammogram. Whatever Sullivan’s intention, it’s not hard to find a political subtext in these works at this moment when women’s rights around their own bodies are under attack.

Currently on view at the Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland, Maine, is a selection of more recent frescoes in conjunction with the retrospective. The exhibition includes a group of small houses, an Eames armchair, a sink, and various articles of clothing, including a kilt, all frescos. Once again, Sullivan's art proves at once accessible and disarming while offering a reminder that the world we live in is composed of objects that both provoke and define us.

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Barbara Sullivan, detail from "Beauty, Beauty" (2004), shaped fresco installation

Barbara Sullivan, “Monhegan Lamp” (2019), shaped fresco

Barbara Sullivan, “Kilt” (2022), shaped fresco (courtesy Caldbeck Gallery)

Barbara Sullivan—Forty Plus Years: A Retrospective *continues at Emery Community Arts Center, University of Maine at Farmington (111 South Street, Farmington, Maine), through November 10. The exhibition was organized by the artist.*

Barbara Sullivan: Selected Work *continues at Caldbeck Gallery (12 Elm Street, Rockland, Maine) through December 21. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*

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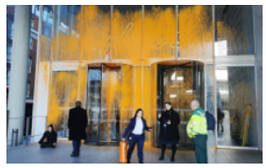
Rhea Nayyar



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Since the trend is getting a little repetitive — though its message no less urgent — we got a little creative and ranked this weekend's interventions. Using soup cans, of course. 🥫

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The designs by artists Deborah Kass and Cleon Peterson were critical of the Supreme Court as well as abortion and pro-gun legislation.

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A Joyous Carnival to Celebrate David Graeber's Lasting Legacy

Artists gathered for the launch of the new David Graeber Institute, which will oversee the scholar's archive of unpublished texts and pursue projects around climate change, debt, labor, and war.

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This November, attend information sessions for both programs and check out their Open Studios in NYC.

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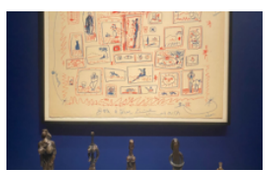
Nora Neely, a recent graduate of the George Washington University's Exhibition Design program, now builds arena stages.



A Miniature View of Modernism's Masters

Though smaller in size than the artists' usual works, the works in Modernism in Miniature gain their heft from their big-name creators.

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Sarah Rose Sharp

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Carl Little

Carl Little's most recent book is Irene Hardwicke Olivieri: Closer to Nature (Pomegranate). He helped produce the film Jon Imber's Left Hand, which premieres at the Maine Jewish Film Festival in March. He lives on Mount Desert...

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