

Sylvia Sleigh. Biography

Born in the Victorian sea-side resort of Llandudno, Wales in 1916, Sylvia Sleigh grew up in England during the grim years of the two world wars and the ensuing rationing of food, clothes and culture. She studied in the Brighton School of Art in Sussex, England, between 1934 and 1937. Here she remembers being outraged by the double standards that allowed female nudes but not male ones in the life drawing classes.

In 1941 she married Michael Greenwood, a local painter and art history lecturer, and friend of British Pop artist Richard Hamilton. They moved to London, and remained together for thirteen years. However, during this time they often lived apart – Sleigh in the village of Pett, Sussex, and Greenwood in London. Her relationship with Greenwood and the proximity to the art world encouraged Sleigh to pursue painting professionally; yet it was her husband's active undermining of her confidence as a painter, which brought it to an abrupt end. Sleigh stopped painting and became a seamstress and dressmaker, eventually opening her own shop in Brighton. Her love of fashion, textiles and patterning remained thereon - indeed, she kept many of the dresses made during her entire life-time.

It was only when the relationship with her husband became estranged that Sleigh re-initiated her artistic practice, attending art history night-classes at the University of London. It was here, in 1944, when Sleigh was twenty-seven, that she met critic Lawrence Alloway, seventeen at the time. This encounter marked the beginning of an intense relationship, both intellectual and emotional. Sleigh found a true partner in Alloway, and vice-versa. They were each other's muses and discussion-mates, and in significant, if subtle ways, their professional practices were intertwined. Sleigh finally obtained a divorce from Greenwood in 1954 and went onto marry Alloway that same year.

Sleigh's first documented participation in a group show was in 1950; her first solo exhibition was in 1953 at the Kensington Art Gallery in London. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, her work consists primarily of still-lives, landscapes, and portraits. These early works were no doubt much inspired by the post-war austerity of the time. However many of the themes and interests that would characterise her mature oeuvre are discernible during this period.

In 1961, Alloway accepted a teaching position at Bennington College in Vermont and he and Sleigh moved to New York City. From 1962 to 1966 Alloway was the curator of the Guggenheim, reaching great notoriety internationally as the champion and critic of the Pop Art movement.

Sleigh continued to pursue figurative painting. New York would remain their primary residence for the rest of their lives. During the 1960s, Sleigh began the theme in her work that is perhaps best known today-male nudes in traditional female poses as seen in paintings by old masters such as Velazquez and Ingres. She also painted

realist portraits of the New York's art world intelligentsia and beautiful nude young men. These works made her both a visual historian of her cultured refined milieu and a seemingly retrograde iconoclast within it. They also ensured her invisibility for a large part of the art world of the time, as it did for her other under-appreciated artists peers, like figurative painters Alex Katz, Alice Neel and Philip Pearlstein. Indeed, Abstraction gripped the world of contemporary painting between the late 1950s until the late 1970s, added to this Sleight's husband's notoriety ensured most critical attention was directed towards him. Despite their career imbalance, particularly during the 1960s, when Alloway was in his heyday, the couple actively participated in and nurtured one another's aesthetic and intellectual sensibilities and practices, including their penchant for iconoclasm in their separate challenges to the art world's prevailing notions of aesthetic quality judged in exclusively formal terms. They stayed together until his premature death 1990.

Sleight survived her husband by two decades, and remained committed to her practice throughout this time. She died in New York in 2010.