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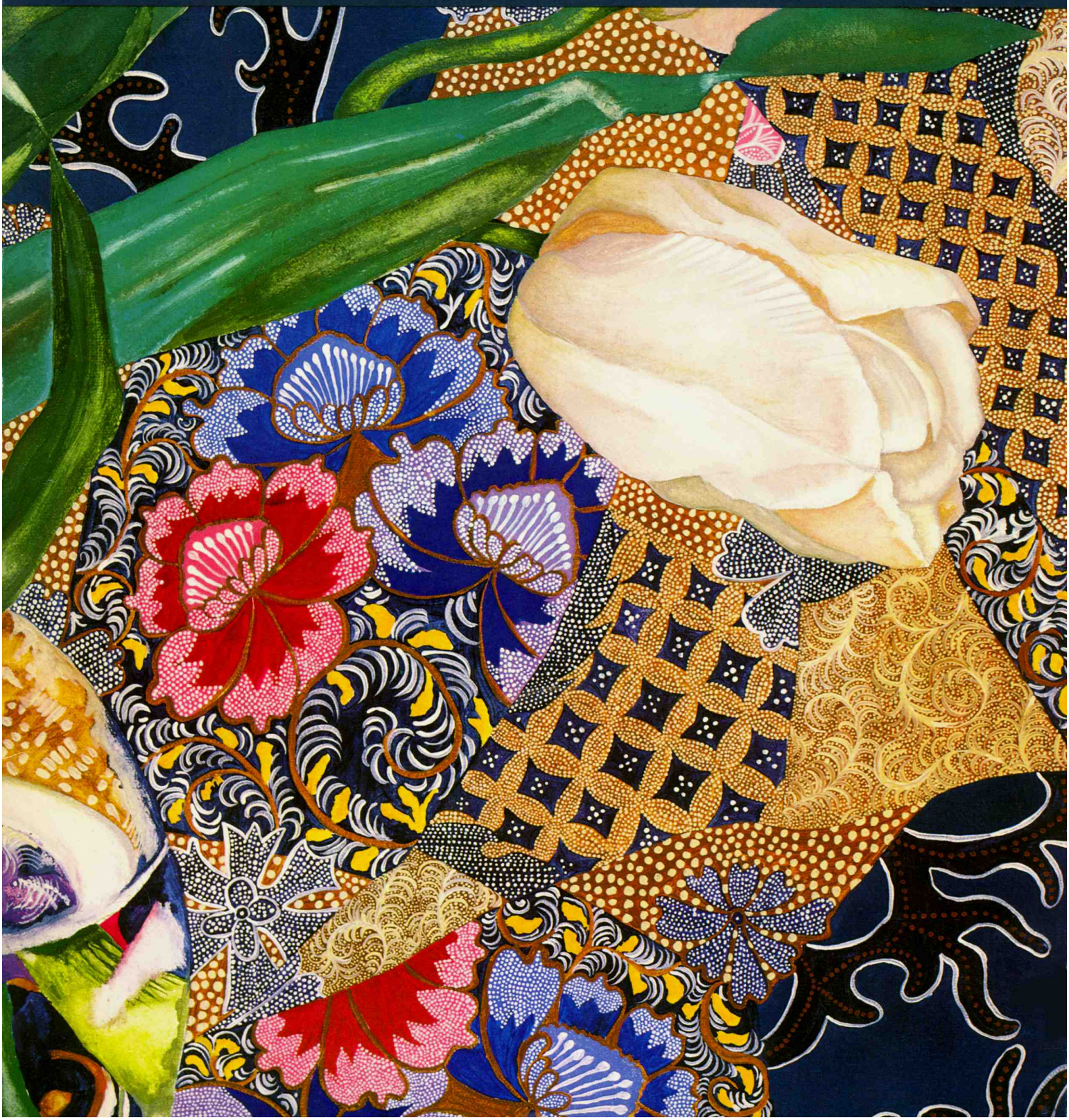

Intimate Excess
The Paintings of Sandra Sallin

Sandra Sallin, *Alor Star*, 1982. Oil on canvas, 11 × 9". Photo Susan Einstein.

Sandy Nelson

"I've always thought I should have been Empress Alexandra," Sallin said.

"Perhaps you were."

"My family is from Russia. They escaped in 1917. My mother worked in the fields for the czar when she was eight years old, and she told me she became furious when the czar didn't pay her one pound of salt that he owed her. Those were the days when the cossacks rode through the town saying, 'Which Jew should we kill today?!' "

As Sallin bubbles from cossacks to college, one topic after another, she radiates the exuberance of a bouncy Judy Garland character saying, "Let's make a show!"—with one exception. She could just as easily be leading a board of directors in a budget meeting or selling stocks to Armand Hammer. Her dark brown eyes zero in on mine like magnetic beams, and I am held by her rapid-fire enthusiasm, and quick mind.

"When I came to look at this studio, I told the lady I needed a space that I could sing in. I suppose she was surprised, but I really did need a place where I could sing as loud as I wanted. I must sing when I paint. I love opera and symphonies. My father was involved with music; he played the violin and was a dental technician. He used to walk miles into Kiev to take violin lessons, and he could make the most impeccable dental plates. A real perfectionist. My mother is an excellent embroiderer. She does knitting, too; in fact, she's a world-class afghan knitter!"

I glance around the small studio dotted with page-size paintings that hang in a horizontal band along one wall. Sallin is telling me about her sister, an interior decorator who owns drawers of fabric samples. I nod. Today is the day all the puzzle pieces of Sallin's life fit together. I've been looking at her slides for a year, wondering why she's still unknown.

Today, too, I discover why someone sits in a bird's-nest perch above La Cienega's gallery district, painting thousands and thousands and thousands of dots on little meandering color bands and twisting shapes that crisscross over canvases as blindingly as do the fruit and vegetation in seventeenth century Flemish tapestries.

I'm reminded of the film *La Grande Bouffe*.(A group of men go off into the French countryside to gourmet themselves to death.) Just looking at her postmodern pastries feeds my visual hunger —I feel like an overeater on a wild sugar binge in Cafe Casino. I'm stuffing my mouth with buttercreams and chocolate mousse and cream puffs and meringue pie and cheesecake and petits fours and dots and arabesques and tulips and pansies and poppies and silks and brocades and zebra stripes.

Or I'm hallucinating in the flower mart. Tender pink petals sweeping across flat daisy designs spreading over mounds and rolls of stripes, wrapping under fringe and over polka dots. Compressed energy piling up, overflowing, and leaping out. *More than more* seems merely a good beginning. Sallin's little paintings look like she is barely able to control her sensual urges. Is she a compulsive space filler who may cover canvas then wall then floor then furniture then self with millions of ripply, rolling patterns, each more dense than the last?

My mind wanders. Does she dream about the Pilgrimage Church in Bavaria—a fantasyland of sensuous rococo decoration that looks as if it was painted by angels? Was she perhaps apprenticed to Rachel Ruysch, the Dutch artist who painted butterflies and bumblebees on exploding bouquets of roses in the seventeenth century? Or does Sallin simply live on a visual diet of illuminated manuscripts, Middle Eastern carpets, and Utamaro's kimonos?

Behind her a corner bank of windows allows the sun to shine in on her monklike activities. She has just taught herself the intricacies of gold leafing, she is saying. "When I bought the gold they just said, 'Oh, it's easy,' so I thought, Oh, it's easy. But I've been working with it for a month trying to figure out how to do this right—reading books and calling people, but I finally did it!"

What if she decides to run for president?—I wonder. No doubt she'd do that right too. "How do you like this one? I've been rushing to finish it." She points to a little painting that glitters with gold shapes on the right and what looks like her studio windows on the left. An odd piece. I don't understand it, really, but I say nothing. I'm glad to see that she's making things that I don't understand, or love instantly.

We look at another. It's covered with dots, and I must tell myself that I'm not sitting with a devout little scribe at Charlemagne's court. A manuscript commissioned by Charles the Bald reminds me of Sallin. He, too, was infatuated with opulence. One page of his Carolingian manuscript depicts Saint Matthew perched upon a golden throne covered with dots. The dots meander around and mix with the brick patterns of two odd little towers, one on either side of him. Around the edges of the page a multitude of leaf and flower patterns lies next to geometric borders, columns, and bands of red orange and gold. Saint Matthew's extremely wiggly garment looks like what would happen to your paper-thin silk kimono if you slept in it in the Amazon rain forest. It swarms with twists and curving lines that bring me back to Sallin's writhing, Beverly Hills Baroque style.

"I used to garden and cook magnificently," she is saying. "I baked pastry and bread and thought that mothers should be around the house."

"Gads," I think to myself, "how ghastly."

"I went to UCLA in the early sixties."

"You did? Why have I not heard about you?" (I thought that I knew about that hotbed of creativity down to the last graduate.) "You went to school with Judy Gerowitz [Chicago] and Tony Berlant and Lloyd Hamrol and Jerry Burchman and Marvin Harden and Michael Todd and . . .?

"Sure. But they went to graduate school, and I didn't. I didn't want to see another teacher in my life! I had a drawing class with Robert Irwin and I didn't like drawing."

"No color."

"Yes, I couldn't bear not using color, and I told him I wanted to paint. He said that if I proved to him that I could draw, he would let me paint, so I drew a hand. He looked at it and thought it was pretty good. I told him to count the fingers. If I could put six fingers on a hand and make it look right, he said, I could paint."

* * *

That was twenty years ago. Today, according to art-world success myths, Sallin is too off-center and too normal to make waves in the art business. Too mature, too happy, too suburban too motherly, too pretty, too unpolitical, too polite, and not poor enough to make important art.

In addition to struggling with these major strikes against her, her love of lush beauty is suspect. It is no wonder that her painting wasn't seen publicly in the sixties. While others were moving earth, painting spare abstractions, and inventing central-core imagery, she was painting pictures of flowers in vases. ("Oh, are you still painting flowers, Sandy?" men asked at parties. "Why yes. Are you still a lawyer?")

In the late seventies her paintings began to include odd configurations: she became interested in the patterns made by branches as they moved across the surface—more interested than in objects per se. This patterning flattened the space, giving it shallow/deep sensations that took her out of the hobbyist cul-de-sac of amateur illusionism and into the modern flat-space attitude that is of considerable interest to painters today. The emergence of Pattern and Decoration as a style was allowing artists to continue to work in the modernist tradition of flat, or nearly flat, spatial planes while including minimal art's opposite, theatrical luxuriousness of any sort.

Gradually Sallin focused upon the lush fabrics that surrounded the flowers, causing the figure and ground to blend. At this point she painted *Melasti* (1981), seen recently at the Arco Center for Visual Art. The "real" flowers and the fabric flowers merge so well that spatial disorientation results. In fact, angled ribbon patterning fractures the space in rows of zigzags, offering geometric contrast to the floral curves that twist endlessly overall.

This cubistlike figure-ground integration erased any lingering questions about her work imitating 17th and 18th century still lifes. Sallin now communicated a sense of authority with her paintings. She had benefited from the validation of "women's content" by the feminist art movement and learned to use the picture plane powerfully. She had abandoned politeness.

"I've always managed to squeeze pattern into my paintings: dishes, fabrics, wallpaper." (Philip Pearlstein, Henri Matisse, or Georges Braque could be speaking here.) "I love the Dutch still life painters. You can be sure that I'd be painting this way even if decoration were not in vogue. I paint for myself. My paintings are places in my mind, escapes from reality, and when people ask me why I paint like this, I say that I dream my paintings and then I paint my dreams." ☆