

Friends & Lovers

Oct 6, 2023 — Jan 20, 2024 | The FLAG Art Foundation, New York, US

Friends & Lovers is an expansive group exhibition that centers on relationships between artists and their subjects and explores the infinite ways, both past and present, we are influenced by our inner circles. Just as a studio visit opens a window into an artist's creative process, who they choose to immortalize through paint, bronze, photography, etc. similarly provides insight into who serves as their inspiration, be that a lover, partner, family member, friend, celebrity crush, or a fleeting encounter.

Friends & Lovers looks at portraiture through the lens of Alice Neel's assertion that she painted "pictures of people." Eschewing portraiture's bourgeois associations, Neel sought to paint resonant, unheroic images of people in her life that were true to her experience of them, as seen in a bracing 1952 painting of her doe-eyed, young son Hartley. Likewise, works by fifty contemporary artists encompass a range of tender, unexpected, complex, and personal moments with and connections to their sitters, creating urgent and ultimately timeless pictures of their people. Artists include María Berrío, Peter Cain, Sophie Calle, Srijon Chowdhury, Alex Bradley Cohen, Will Cotton, Patricia Cronin, Anthony Cudahy, John Currin, Bernadette Despujols, Christopher Duffy, Nicole Eisenman, Shanique Emelife, Awol Erizku, Eric Fischl, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Ewan Gibbs, Jerrell Gibbs, Nan Goldin, Felix González-Torres, Jenna Gribbon, Emiliana Henríquez, Patty Horing, Doron Langberg, Shona McAndrew, Dave McKenzie, Sam McKinniss, Marilyn Minter, Alice Neel, Arcmanoro Niles, Aliza Nisenbaum, Jennifer Packer, Elizabeth Peyton, Jack Pierson, Alessandro Raho, LJ Roberts, Audrey Rodriguez, Thomas Ruff, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Mike Silva, Rudolf Stingel, Ruby Sky Stiler, Billy Sullivan, Claire Tabouret, Alessandro Teoldi, Wolfgang Tillmans, Jim Torok, Justin Wadlington, Xiao Wang, Anna Weyant, D'Angelo Lovell Williams, and Sung Jik Yang.

Friends & Lovers begins with Christopher Duffy's wall-mounted bronze plaque aptly stating *If Your Friends Knew My Friends, They Would Be Our Friends.*, 2012, paired with a floor-to-ceiling installation featuring nearly three dozen paintings, pastels, and graphite drawings by Billy Sullivan. Created between 1974 and 2019, each work reflects the individual personalities of Sullivan's eclectic New York social circle of artists, club icons, friends, and performers; presented together they create a family tree of sorts for the artist and a portrait of New York's underground creative scene over the past four decades. Jim Torok's miniature graphite headshots, titled *Williamsburg Artists & Friends*, similarly creates a diary of his neighborhood and sphere of influence. Thomas Ruff's *Portrait (J. Baumgarten)*, 1989, is part of a larger series of passport-style photographs that document Ruff's friends and art-school colleagues. Set to monumental size, yet devoid of any superfluous background details, these spare images reveal nothing of the sitter other than a connection to the artist. Several artist portraits by their artist friends, including Alex Bradley Cohen's *Jennifer Packer*, 2017, Nicole Eisenman's *Lee and TM*, 2015, Jenna Gribbon's *Doron*, 2020, Elizabeth Peyton's *Ken and Nick (Ken Okiishi and Nick Mauss)*, 2005, among others, further elucidate the closeness of artistic communities and chosen families.

Playing with family tropes through idealized ancient Greek- and cubist-inspired human forms, Ruby Sky Stiler’s wood cut-out *Rose Bathers*, 2021, portrays a highly stylized family unit, wherein each member fits perfectly in their place. Bernadette Despujols’s *mi hermana y sus hijas en Febrero (My Sister and Her Daughters in February)*, 2023, presents a multigenerational and matriarchal Venezuelan family crowded onto a sofa where the past, present, and future meld together. Patricia Cronin’s *Memorial to a Marriage*, modeled 2002, cast 2015, was created at a time when same-sex marriage was illegal in the U.S. Depicting Cronin and her partner, fellow artist Deborah Kass, lying in bed, embraced in each other’s arms, *Memorial to a Marriage* is equal parts a protest, a love letter, and a headstone for their burial plot in Woodlawn Cemetery. From the artist’s acclaimed *The Notion of Family* series, 2001-14, LaToya Ruby Frazier’s *Me and Mom’s Boyfriend Mr. Art*, 2005, comprises a double portrait illustrating the complexities of adult parent-child relationships. Motherhood and maternal bonds are explored in works by D’Angelo Lovell Williams, whose pigment print *Until We Separate (Mom)*, 2019, wherein the artist’s head cradled in his mother’s lap; Alessandro Teoldi’s *Fili and Mom*, 2022, in which a momentary embrace is rendered permanent in cast concrete; Srijon Chowdhury’s Successionist-style portrait of his expecting wife *With Child*, 2020, and John Currin’s new portrait of his wife, artist Rachel Feinstein, a constant muse of his over the course of their nearly three-decade relationship.

Represented by a wall plaque, Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s “*Untitled*”, 1991, is a physical artwork only intended for private display by its owner, whose loan to *Friends & Lovers* reflects the work’s unique parameters of access. “*Untitled*”, 1991, embodies a pact between an artist and collector, in which the Gonzalez-Torres would continuously send personal effects and other materials, including photographs, horoscopes, ticket stubs, hand-written letters, objects that resemble discrete artworks, etc., which the collector would safeguard in a wooden letter-tray box. The piece will only be known to the public through signifiers such as these words—a conceptual representation and mythos of entrusting belongings, experiences, travels, and ideas—while the true contents stay forever between the Gonzalez-Torres and the collector.