



*Eugene O'Neil*, ca. late 1920s-early 1940s, colored pencil, wax crayon, ink, and graphite on paper, 39 1/4 x 19 in (99.7 x 48.3 cm) (overall)

52 WALKER ST | MAY 15 - JUN 27, 2026

## Mary Sully

James Cohan is pleased to present an exhibition of works by Mary Sully on view at the gallery's 52 Walker Street location from May 15 through June 27, 2026. Curated by Jenelle Porter and organized in collaboration with the Mary Sully Foundation, this exhibition is the first solo gallery presentation in New York of Sully's work. The gallery will host an opening reception on Friday, May 15 from 6-8 PM, and a conversation between historian and author Philip J. Deloria, great-nephew of Mary Sully and author of *Becoming Mary Sully: Toward an American Indian Abstract*, and curator Jenelle Porter on Thursday, May 28 at 6:30 PM.

In the late 1920s, Mary Sully began a series of inventive drawings she called "personality prints," each a portrayal of a celebrity. Mixing both representative and abstract elements with sophisticated patterning, the artist merged her knowledge of modern art and design with Native American art forms to create a dazzling body of work. Her choice of subjects—and the ways she portrayed them—highlight the proliferating networks that characterized the modern, mechanical age. By representing the women and men who shaped modern life, Sully drew her era and, by extension, herself within that era. Her abstract drawings did not fit neatly into codified categories of avant-garde modernism and design, or the dominant strains of the Native American painting trends emerging from New Mexico and Oklahoma. Her oeuvre was saved for decades by her descendants, and has only recently come to the public's attention.

A quintessentially cosmopolitan figure, Sully was a Yankton Dakota citizen and self-taught artist who moved between midwestern towns and eastern cities. In 1931, she settled in New York City with her sister Ella Deloria, an ethnographer and language translator, where they would remain for the better part of the next decade—a period of tumultuous social and economic transformations imposed by the Great Depression. The federal government’s New Deal programs enabled New York’s economic development and cultural initiatives—from bridges to arts programs—which overlapped with rapidly expanding mass media, such as radio, magazines, and film.

Each work portrays a notable person of Sully’s time, from stars of the screen, stage and radio, to writers, inventors, and titans of industry. The personality prints are not prints, but drawings made with colored pencil, ink, graphite, and paint on three differently-sized sheets of paper arranged as a vertical triptych. Formally, Sully hewed to a consistent stylistic program that capitalized on bilateral and rotational symmetry, and operated across a continuum of abstraction and representation. These self-imposed constraints grounded an astonishing variety of imagery, pattern, and color across the 134 triptychs. The top panel features a “picture” of the subject distilled to both representational symbols and abstract motifs; the middle panel reworks the motifs and colors of the top panel as a repeating design pattern; and the bottom panel synthesizes elements of the top and middle panels with aesthetic systems drawn from Indigenous beadwork, quillwork, rawhide containers (“parfleche”), and weaving.

In Sully’s portrait of *Henry Ford*, for instance, the automaker and inventor of assembly-line manufacturing is drawn as a globe on wheels floating amidst cloud-like shapes evocative of the script of the distinctive Ford logo. A reworked “driving globe” characterizes the middle panel. The bottom panel translates these elements into a composition with alternating forms of geometric patterning.

The exhibition is structured around three subjects that Sully engaged with while living in New York: radio stars of the 1930s, including Bing Crosby and Lowell Thomas; stars of Hollywood and Broadway, such as Greta Garbo and Edward Everett Horton and playwrights Noel Coward and Eugene O’Neill; and works that attest to her travels in and around the city itself amidst the urban and rural transformations of the era. The range of personalities shows Sully as a New Yorker, one who was captivated by the city’s blending of entertainers and industrialists who were changing the shape and texture of modern life. Because the city was a hotbed of cultural activity and technological innovation, Sully’s works traced the networks of the social and entertainment milieus, and her consideration of them suggests as much about their distinguishing qualities as it does their relationship to one another. By showing how the people and concepts she drew connected her to them, to one another, and to the culture at large, these works reveal Sully’s profound curiosity about personality, what it signifies, and how celebrity is so often essentialized and instrumentalized.

Mary Sully (b. 1886, Standing Rock Reservation, South Dakota, d. 1963, Omaha, Nebraska) born Susan Mabel Deloria, was a Yankton Dakota artist active from the 1920s through the 1940s. The significance of Sully’s personality prints was not recognized until her great-nephew, historian Philip J. Deloria authored a monographic study *Becoming Mary Sully: Toward an American Indian Abstract*, in 2019. Mary Sully was recently featured in *An Indigenous Present*, curated by Jenelle Porter and Jeffrey Gibson, at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston. The exhibition travels to the Frist Art Museum in Nashville (June 26–September 27, 2026) and the Frye Art Museum in Seattle (November 7, 2026–February 14, 2027). The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Minneapolis Institute of Art presented *Mary Sully: Native Modern* in 2024, the first solo museum exhibition dedicated to Sully’s work.

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