

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Art in America

Elizabeth Murray at Paula Cooper

In her recent show of nine paintings, a diverse group of shaped and rectangular canvases done over the past year, it looked as if Elizabeth Murray wanted each aspect of her abstraction—surface, color, shape and line—to be as distinct and as full of personality as possible, even to the point where these elements worked against each other. Murray seems to count on the conflict of unlike qualities to give her work its appeal; these paintings, a little like nervous teenagers, are alternately ingratiating and antagonistic, sophisticated and dopey. There's always some isolated shape or color to like, and usually something which will strike you as mildly offensive or obvious. The abundance of personality makes it look like Murray is working backward from abstraction toward representation, not in terms of imagery per se, but in terms of energy; some shapes seem ready to jump right off the canvas and strut away.

The urgent, personable energy in Murray's work begins with her surfaces, which are built up of layers of rough, packed-down oil paint and which, although uniformly dense, are never uniform: strokes vary according to the size of an area and remain visible according to the way each color dries; often a seemingly monochrome area will be an animated flurry of matte and shiny patches. In Murray's earlier paintings, rough surfaces were embedded with delicately eccentric linear geometries, and pale, reticent colors were normal. Then, dispensing with repetition, Murray started pinning down stronger colors (one or two at a time) with quirky little arcs and loops, or accent-mark dots and squares. In her new paintings, she has further intensified her color and matched the aggressiveness of her surfaces with large, often goofily irregular shapes, bobbing and lurching against the shimmering backgrounds, against each other, against the edges of the canvas and, after the controlled flatness of her previous work, she's concentrating on the tilted, off-balance space these shapes set in motion.

Five of the paintings in this show

seem literally to have been pushed out of shape by the pressure; four are diamond-shaped canvases and the fifth, *Falling*, is a large squarish rectangle tipped on one corner. As a group they show the various ways Murray plays elegance against awkwardness in her work. *Rise*, a tilted, bottom-heavy diamond, is too completely resolved; its elements, a geranium pink sphere pushing up into red, crossed by a dark zig-zag running tip to tip, are completely lined up with the shape of the canvas and the result is a neat, simple recession of space. The over-complicated, aptly titled *Falling*, on the other hand, has dead-weight shapes that never get off the ground. It epitomizes Murray's ability to let her paintings trade on their homeliness: a ponderous red loop spans an equally gawky brown shape (something like a tear-drop with an extra point), flanked by areas of green and yellow, while a too-thin blue line angles ineffectually across them all. The other three diamond-shaped paintings avoid both extremes by being off-kilter and weightless. In each the asymmetrical canvas shape truncates and anchors a free-floating painted shape or two. Although these paintings are weakened by looking more like fragments than whole paintings, and by their Constructivist arrangements, Murray achieves in each of them a distinct kind of space.

The four remaining paintings are rectilinear. In *Rolling Ball* and *Southern California* Murray lets her shapes fill the surface, obliterating the background, except for little slices of color at the edges. The bright, buoyant shapes float forward, overlap, zoom in and out; everything is separate but in balance. These are the most completely successful, "professional"

paintings in the show; they avoid Murray's usual clumsiness and yet remain blunt and unrefined. The other two paintings, *Back* and *Beginner*, are more recent, more problematic but also provocative; in them Murray attempts to push her awkwardness through to a profound, grave, almost tragic feeling. Each painting is dominated by a single large, overly-original shape that nudges three sides of the canvas. The patchy surfaces have a nocturnal shimmer; the colors, dark green on black and dark blue on slate, are deep and gloomy. Despite the rambunctious eccentricity of the shapes, the isolation, color and scale of these paintings give them a kind of austere presence that is new to Murray's work.

—Roberta Smith



Elizabeth Murray: *Southern California*, 1976.
oil on canvas, 79 by 75 1/2 inches, at Paula Cooper.