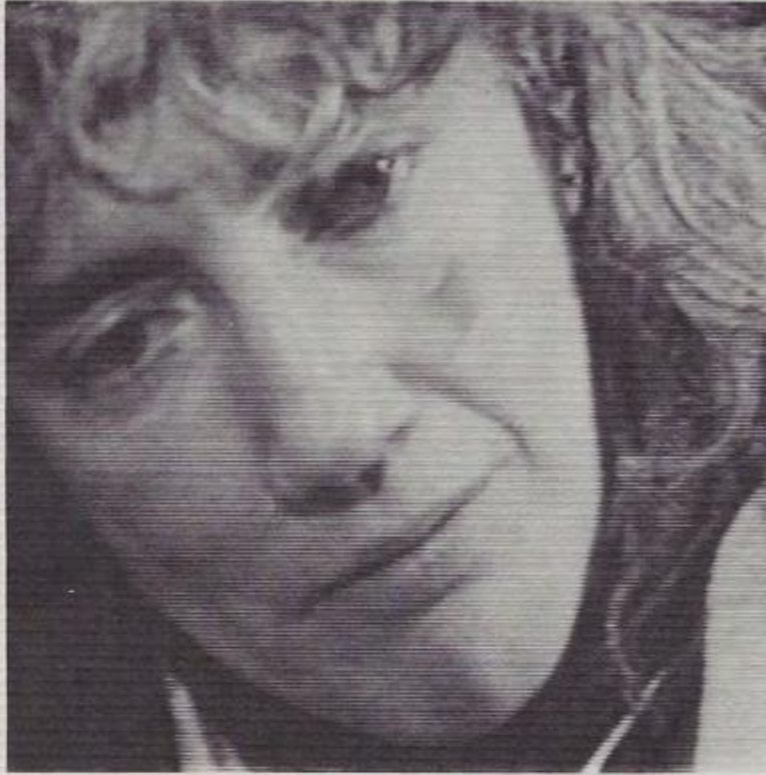


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Kate Horsfield, "Elizabeth Murray," *Profile*, Summer 1986

## P R O F I L E

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Art is about the spirit of life.  
It is not really about the spirit of  
repression.

ELIZABETH  
MURRAY

PROFILE VOL. 5  
NO. 3 SUMMER 1986  
\$3.00

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## V I D E O D A T A B A N K

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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PROFILE is an idea-oriented publication devoted to an exploration of artists' ideas by the artists themselves.

It has been said that history is really the record of living persons; a sort of collective biography of an era, a movement, a place. Yet, all too often the subject is obscured by a biography originally intended to illuminate it. Likewise in critical texts, one learns to read both the critic/author and the artist lurking somewhere behind the surface. While such studies form the mainstay of art literacy, both tend to blur the image of the artist as an actual historical or contemporary figure. The person gives way to the myth. There is no dispensing with the critic's role in mapping out the terrain of contemporary art, but neither can we dispense with the need to gather primary resource data from the very artists at work in that terrain. The emphasis placed on these individual profiles gives a very real sense of the essentially solitary nature of art-making and creates an interface between subjective knowledge and critical subject matter.

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# GLADSTONE GALLERY

## On Art and Artists: ELIZABETH MERRAI

The text that follows is an edited transcript of the videotape interview produced by Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield in 1982. Elizabeth Merrey is interviewed by Kate Horsfield at the Video Data Bank studio in New York.



Let's go back to the beginning. Can you give us a little background information, where you came from, etc.?

I was born in Chicago in 1940. I lived there until I was about eight. Then I lived in a little town in Michigan and then in Bloomington, Illinois.

Why did you decide to go to art school and not to a college? You must have had some idea about a future for yourself as an artist.

At a very early age I decided that I was going to be a cartoonist. I could draw really well. I don't know how. People would say, "Oh, you are real talented," and I could get approval--mostly approval from my father. He really loved it that I could draw images so well. It was the only way that I could express myself inside where nobody said that it was bad. So my parents were real encouraging from the time I was very little. They told me all the time that I was going to be a famous artist. That was my father's line.

When I was in high school I sort of thought about being a poet or an anthropologist, but it never really occurred to me not to be an artist, and it didn't feel like I could change it in any way.

I ended up going to the Art Institute of Chicago just by luck. My parents couldn't afford to send me anywhere except to the local college which was tuition free, but I got a scholarship to the Art Institute through my high school art teacher who actually set the whole thing up.

That's interesting that you said your father supported this idea because in the 1940s it was very unusual for a girl to be encouraged to give up to be an artist. Was he encouraging you to be a commercial artist?

I don't think that my father really had any idea about the various kinds of art, the levels or the standards of being a commercial artist or being a fine artist. I think my father would have somehow rolled Michelangelo and Walt Disney into one. I thought about that just recently, that it is surprising that he was so supportive of all. Particularly surprising in that, later, he was quite sick and unable to work. They had no money--absolutely none. So for them to encourage their daughter to be an artist was a little unusual. But I really never thought about it much until a couple of years ago.

So I went to Chicago by myself in 1958, when I was eighteen. I knew about Leonardo da Vinci and Picasso and it all really threatened me so much.

When you got to the Art Institute, you chose fine art. How did that happen?

I was a teenage bobby-sox kid. I was putting three inches of make-up on and wearing crewneck sweaters and straight stuff like that. I went to Chicago thinking that I was going to be a commercial artist. But because I was so straight the most interesting people seemed to be the ones who were involved in painting and sculpture. So I was wearing my little Pendleton skirt, and I was being introduced to this incredibly free world where people were walking around with beards, and the men were not these jocks but were interested in reading poetry. And it seemed so incredible that people could make this stuff, art, and not care about money, not care about what other people thought about them. It was a totally different world from the kind of very straight Midwest thing I grew up in. And I got very involved in style as much as in the idea of being an artist.

When I finally decided that I was going to try to be a painter, I flipped out because all of a sudden--I guess I was twenty--I realized I had never decided anything on my own. And it was so difficult; it was very hard. I couldn't do it. I couldn't do the commercial art either. I couldn't draw a straight line--literally!

I could not bear what one had to go through to make a layout. So that was a disaster. But still it was something I had planned to do from the time I was really little. It occurred to me that I don't have to do this. I could do something else.

I was there at the Art Institute and I was taking a painting class. So I started to try painting. It was enormously frustrating. I didn't know how all that stuff happened. I mean I had no idea. It sounds simplistic to say that we all have our destinies and I felt that something just kept leading me on. It was all so unknown. I was so frightened. So that made it even more important to get that work out for myself.

At that age and in a school situation you completely adopt the ideals of all the people around you: a fine artist was somebody who was really important, it was the real struggle, and it had intense meaning. Doing anything else was cheap in comparison. That whole hierarchy affected me a lot.

The other thing was looking, looking at the art in the Museum. I saw all those paintings and I began to relate to them. It really never occurred to me that painting was something that was just about communication, it was that it had such a power to affect people visually. I began to just want to do it.

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Can you remember particular paintings in the Museum that were of great value to you, in terms of beginning to see?

Yes, I think the first painting I saw that really pulled at me was the little Cezanne painting of the apples in the basket, a lopsided basket. It is kind of an oblong bowl and the space in all pouring out somehow at you. I didn't know about any formal thing but I was very moved. I just couldn't get over it. At first it was very hard to understand and it intrigued me somehow. The experience of looking at it took me from thinking about it as some kind of intellectual exercise—which was what my teachers were all telling me. It was a real breakthrough for me when I saw that it was very sensual and clumsy in a certain way.

All of a sudden I realized clearly that painting was really about the joy of looking at painting. It was like finding out who the person was inside the painting. And I felt who he was. It seemed like a great way to express the inside of you. And it totally relaxed me in a certain way. It was like saying "Oh yeah, that's what I'm doing this for." It was like a mirror really. I was seeing a reflection of this man, Cezanne. I began to really see what he was doing with his marks. It was a very important experience because somehow it was solid enough for me to really be able to understand that the very analytic way that most people looked at Cezanne in the '40s and '50s was just bullshit.

So you are talking here about a real connection, a felt connection.

Yes. It felt like a relationship. Like when you fall in love with someone. It wasn't that much different. It sounds a little kooky but at that point I was so involved, it was like my sublimation I suppose. The other painter was de Kooning. They have Excavation at the Art Institute and from that painting I literally learned how to paint. You can feel how he is doing that stuff so succinctly.

This period of time that you are talking about in the late '50s, when you were a student at the Art Institute. Were you aware of the entire energy system surrounding Abstract Expressionism?

Only in the last years I was there. I had seen Fullock and de Kooning in the American Annual show at the Art Institute. That was the first time I saw them. Actually one of the paintings I remember the most clearly was a Jack Tworkov painting. One of those long, marked paintings. I forget what that series was called. They had Ellsworth Kelly, and Barnett Newman, painters I had never seen before. And Jasper Johns's American Flag, which I didn't understand, but it intrigued me. They had a Kauschenberg. At that time they were the young upstarts.

What kind of response did you have to this kind of work?

I thought it was incredibly exciting. It made everything around it look tight. It was very regenerative. Like somehow this was what it was all about. It was very free.

How did this feeling about painting compare with the kinds of messages that were coming down about being an artist from the teachers that you had or your peer group?

I had closer relationships with my peers than I did with the teachers because I didn't really talk to the teachers. At first I was afraid of them, and then I thought that they were full of it. What they wanted to do was proselytize. First of all there was only one woman instructor there, who was quite wonderful, [Camille] Andrene Kauffman. She was completely encouraging in a way that sometimes wasn't great because she would accept any kind of drizzle that you did. But her point was that if you wanted to do it you could do it. She was important to me. The other instructors were involved in saying this is good and this is bad. It was just devastating. Then I began to stand on my own two feet. The way I would turn them off was by not listening to them. And I thought that the students that listened to them were kind of ridiculous. But actually I didn't feel as strong as I'm sounding now; I felt very, very vulnerable then. I isolated myself which wasn't very good.

Literally, for the last year I was there, I spoke to so one. And it was not a great thing to do. But it did get me through and out of there.

This must have been a very intense period of experimentation for you, being made of the freedom of American art and art itself. What kind of approaches were you taking in terms of developing your own work?

My work looked like what became Chicago funk art—I went to school with all those people—kind of globally figurative images. It was very fantasy oriented, painted very expressionistically. But in terms of my feelings about development then, the thing that felt most clear to me was that you just simply had to work all the time very, very hard at the act of putting the paint down and moving the paint around. I didn't feel as though I had any ideas or any kind of specific philosophy or aesthetic that I wanted to promote. It was more that I wanted to develop emotionally. I know what you are asking and it is really hard to answer somehow. Because at that point in time, it felt like such an enormous undertaking to say "I'm an artist." The big thing I wanted to do was be an artist. To really feel that I was an artist and that I had a right to do it and I could succeed on my own terms. I didn't know what the next steps would be except to keep painting. I still don't.

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Do you remember any kinds of influences from Chicago art? Though it wasn't really what we now know as Chicago art at that point. Do you remember an interest in that type of personal work?

Part of the students in Chicago pushed toward something more eccentric and more personal and, though it was certainly somewhat depressed, for me it was positive—as opposed to the New York school. Also the Chicago people had for some reason always been very influenced by German Expressionism, and there were a lot of German Expressionist shows at the Institute while I was there. That influenced me enormously at the time. I think it influenced a lot of the people that I was going to school with.

There was a lot of influence by de Chirico and people who were psychological...

Yes. That's exactly it. The more psychological kinds of approaches always seem to be what's appealing in Chicago. There is a real move towards that. I certainly think I picked it up. It was in me anyway and it appealed to me. Then going on to San Francisco it just developed even more.

It has been said that during this period of time that we are talking about the School of the Art Institute gave the students a very early sense of commitment to being an artist. Would you say that your commitment began at that point?

A conscious commitment, yes. But I think your commitment to doing stuff like that starts when you are born. You are going to be an artist and use that as a way to change yourself, your life. At one point after I was there for a few years, I kind of realized what was going on. I was so scared but all of a sudden I was thinking, "My God, am I going to do this? This isn't real." And there was a point that I just thought, "I can't do this. It's too big of a thing for me." I worked on myself to believe that it was something that I could be.

Talk a little about the period when you were in San Francisco.

I went to graduate school in San Francisco, actually Mills College in Oakland. It was not like being in school. Nobody bothered me and it was two years to work. Rather than being scared that I couldn't do it, I felt I could, that I was an artist. And there were some interesting people around there at that time. San Francisco was sort of having a renaissance. Everyone was excited about art and people there like [William] Wiley, [Frank] Lobdell, the California figure painters, were hitting their prime. And this guy Carlos Villa was someone I went to school with. He influenced me enormously. The thing that was good was there wasn't this kind of high seriousness. Like "I'll die doing it, it's too much." They drank beer while they worked, and they did this and that. It was a good experience—it broke me open a little bit.

So there was a certain kind of playfulness and a different kind of spirit about San Francisco. Did this have a direct effect on your work?

Yes it did. First of all I started to work much, much larger. I started to work with more paint. And I got much more connected. It was a direction I was going in anyway. The work got more involved with images and then gradually more and more abstract and then back to images again. But at this time, I was very much affected by the Pop Art show that came to L.A. It was the first time most of it had been seen in California. And there was a Jasper Johns show someplace in San Francisco.

I was very affected by the show of Johns, it was just fantastic. Watching someone use paint in such a structured kind of way and yet with that kind of humor and that kind of seriousness all combined, it all felt very pertinent to me and very psychological also. But it wasn't so klutzy as the Chicago stuff. I felt like there was more structure. It had a kind of formality to it and it laughed at formality at the same time.

I think it is important for me to feel—not that art has meaning, I think that is a given—but that it is communicating, it is

reaching out in some very specific ways and commenting socially. And Pop art certainly did it. The paintings I ended up liking the most were the Oldenbergs. And, for a while, Warhol, but then he got too media-oriented for me. It was another way of looking at what art could be. I think it was a very open, exciting time. There was a lot going on then. Very different from now somehow.

What was your work like at Mills?

Big drippy paintings with surface kinds of forms. I was influenced by Gorky and de Kooning. It was real unconscious work. Very physical work. I was going up to the canvas and smushing the paint on and throwing it on. It was my whole life.

One really big thing that happened was that I met my friend Jennifer Bartlett there. And that has been a very important friendship in terms of our art making. We got ourselves through a very lonely place by connecting with each other. We have shared a lot.

So what were some of the steps that led up to your getting to New York? You didn't come directly after Mills.

No. I got married when I was in graduate school and we stayed in San Francisco for another couple of years. Then I got my first teaching job at a place called Rosary Hill College in Buffalo.

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N.Y. I worked for a nun named Sister Jean. It was a riot. In Buffalo I was involved with being very isolated, and feeling very ready to try to get into New York to make contacts and be known in some way.

In Buffalo were you working on sculpture?

Yes. I was doing a lot of sculpture that really never worked out. I was interested in doing sculpture that was painted, that was kinetic, that moved, that you could sit on, that was soft, that was hard. I did a lot of pieces that in retrospect were kind of interesting to think about but the way they looked was totally impossible. Unformed in a certain way, very clumsy. Some of the images that I was working on then, trying to articulate, seem to be affecting me right now. The work was real eccentric and weird and very unconscious in a certain way. I did this enormous pair of men's pants that lighted up, and the knees twirled. I did pillows that the stuffing was coming out of and big springs. I made roads, soft roads. I didn't really have an idea of what they were all about. When it fell apart for me was when I realized that things were getting bulgier and bulgier and I was trying to put paint on them. It was hard to stop doing them but I had to because it wasn't going anywhere. It was enormously frustrating.

When you say that it wasn't going anywhere did that mean you didn't have the proper kind of contact with it?

To make those pieces work I needed to have things made outside of the studio, fabricated, and that took money that I didn't have. Also fabricated for me meant less contact. It was very clear that I needed to have that contact. I got more anxious as things went further, and it got very difficult for me to do. My mind just doesn't work that way. I got less willing to figure things out. I would have had to learn to be a mechanic, to learn to do all these things I just wasn't interested in doing. I was incredibly frustrated for a couple of years. When your art is going badly I think it is so hard to face it. Emotionally there is a lot at stake there for an artist. Maybe not more or less than other people but the emotional and psychological necessity is a big part of why you are doing it anyway. So I just couldn't even face it.

At what point did you begin to see your internal track, your connection, what was "you," in your work?

I think that what happens is that there is a lot of blind faith involved. When I look back I think that at every period I thought I was connected to myself. And I was. I was connected to looking for myself at a new level and trying the best I could.

What happened was really fortuitous. We moved to New York and I began to write. I was still doing sculptural things but they got smaller and smaller. They got fancy in a certain way and more eccentric but more refined. I got support from my friends except for Jennifer Bartlett who at one point told me what she really thought of what I was doing. She didn't tell me in a bad way, she was someone who was enormously supportive of my work. And I knew that she completely believed in me. She was somebody who was basically positive and really wished me well. It took me about a year to hear what she was telling me about what I was doing. She was saying that she felt I was repeating, repeating, repeating--like going around in a dryer. And I was unable to move off the dime.

In 1969 I had a child. This event was the biggest thing that ever happened to me. It absolutely and totally changed my life in a way that I could have never predicted. And for the first year the experience of raising a baby and doing all that other stuff completely screwed me up. First of all it was a very intense, incredible physical experience to have a child. It was also freaky for me because I was very concerned with my work and my art at that time was very, very fucked up. Without knowing it I was getting off the last of the fantasy.

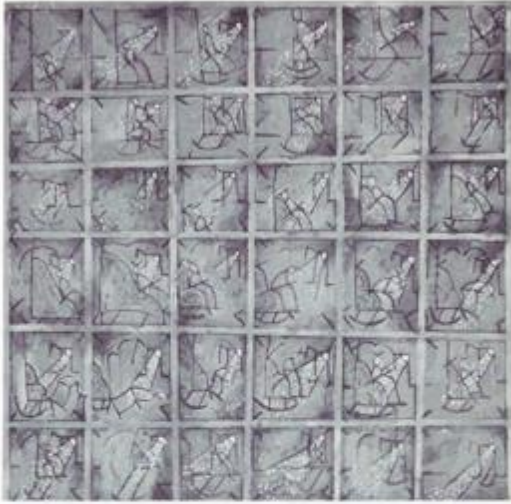
And I was very affected by moving to New York. I wanted to stay by myself and just let my development go. I was also feeling anxieties from looking around me. And for the first time feeling ambitious--a little bit ambitious--like, "Oh, I could put my work in a gallery or I could do that." It was a funny kind of pressure that I had never really been concerned with before. It all just flipped my head around. I had been writing and doing these very complex little drawings and sculpture things. And I knew I had to get down to business right away. I needed to cut into myself and break through something. I realized that if I was going to do any work with the baby at all, it was going to have to be really simple. So what I did was go out and get some stretchers, stretch up a canvas, and start painting. And the minute I started to paint I realized it was like coming home again. I think what I said to myself was, "Well, bearer of small brain, this is what I can do." And that was a key moment for me. I just started to paint again and I haven't really stopped since.

How long had you been in New York at this point?

About three years.

Having a baby really, in a sense, altered your course. Or got you back on course?

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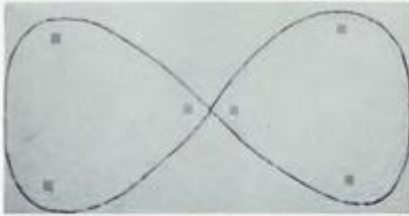


*Madame Cezanne in Rocking Chair, 1972, oil on canvas, 35" X 35"*



*Flamingo, 1974, oil on canvas, 90" X 87"*

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Top: Möbius Band, 1974, oil on canvas, 14" X 28"  
Bottom: Pink Spiral Loop, 1975, oil on canvas, 78" X 76";  
Photo: Geoffrey Clements

Yes. Either way. Ultimately I would have stumbled back into painting. But that event was incredibly cathartic and very moving. When you are involved with a baby you are so open in a certain way. Emotionally you're crazy, but you are open because there is this little being around. And it is also very positive in terms of ego. It was the first time in my life that I really gave something to another human being. You have to or else they will die. It is very primitive but then, to really allow myself to be pulled away from my work gave me a new way of looking at it. It was very frustrating because my work was bad. That is when you really want to be doing it. But on the other hand I just saw art and myself in a very different way. It kind of shattered my ego in relationship to my work.

The big thing that happened was that I realized it was something that I wanted to do for me. I needed just to do it. Even if I could only do it two hours a week. I wasn't doing it to get fame, or recognition. The activity was very, very crucial to me. It was a very interesting thing to find out. A lot of people knew that but I didn't know it yet.

That was when?

That was in 1970 that I started to paint again.

What did the work look like when you started w/ these little paintings?

The first painting I did—and the work continued to be very similar to this for a year or so—was a kind of long, tall painting, a red painting with a sort of gray border around it. It looked like a baby's blanket. And inside the shape I kind of etched in these marks. I was thinking of a little house with a little moon rising above it. It had a kind of pattern sort of look but very, very flat. And primarily it was about the paint, about how the paint worked inside those little images. Most people never saw the images. Lots of times the people don't see the images in my work. I liked the painting. I immediately felt I was doing the right thing.

So it felt completely different?

It felt like it was mine. I was doing what I needed to do. I knew I could make it work. It was the sense that I was doing something I could resolve—if I stuck with it. And I don't think emotionally I feel any different from that now.

I understand what you are saying about that strongly felt connection to the work. Was there any other kind of external influence to it or did it just come from the inside?



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I can't honestly think of any external influences. Once I started to paint again I felt like it was really coming out of me. The influences from the past were pretty much absorbed.

So this work was primarily made up of marks on the surface done in a very flat manner, the marks more or less forced readable images, but not totally?

Yes. And that totally fascinates me. I'm interested in how an image is absolutely one thing and can be another thing too. The alternate reality is always present in its physical presence. It's really very exciting.

There's the whole alchemy thing. I think that painting is like a kind of real primitive seed; it's about transformation. Like a blob of red on the table; you pick it up and put it down and it's something else. Or else it isn't something else, and then you have to try to make it be something. It's totally delightful.

As I honed down the work over the next three, four or five years, I tried very hard to get the images out. I began to connect image to ego. I would recall something from the past that I would like to make invisible in the work.

And I got more and more involved with the physicality of the paint. And actually I think that painting is kind of regressive psychologically; it's almost like playing with your shit or something, squeezing the paint out of the tube. It's made with this gooky stuff.

The painting, Madame Cozanne in the Rocking Chair, is readable, a very rough type surface, and made up of little marks moving in various directions. From that painting forward, what kind of changes occurred that got you to the point when you were doing the Mobius strip paintings?

That is exactly what I was trying to describe through Madame Cozanne in the Rocking Chair. Images, motion and fragmentation. After two or three years I was slowly reducing one single image into a more holistic space. I got more involved with the surface of the paint, with the feeling of the paint on the surface. And to do that I focused on a single image, line or square. I wasn't interested in keeping that narrative in the work anymore. I was interested in a much more holistic statement.

At this point it seems like you are really beginning to break away into something very individual. What we would now call your work. I really begin to see it at the time when you are doing the Mobius strip paintings with the small squares of color located close to the edges and in the Mobius band. There is a tremendous amount of tension and power in the composition and drawing. These works are very strongly felt. I would like to hear you talk just a little bit more about that particular period of thinking.

I feel so far away from that place right now. But when I was doing those paintings I did have the feeling you describe. The tension is what took the time; it is what makes it both very frustrating and very rewarding. The rewards come to me when I find the right place to put things. Now I arrive at it can be very different. Years ago things felt right towards the center. Everything revolved around finding a center in the space, and finding a satisfaction within yourself when you externalize where the center is. And sometimes I am more interested in saying this is the center by putting something out there. The space of the stretchers, the canvas is like the world. There is an edge to the world—I can see it—and then it goes into the wall. That edge and how the shapes relate and feel against the edge is the thing that makes that tension occur.

When I did those paintings, I thought, "I've hit it. This is it!"—like I finally landed someplace. I was very, very happy for a couple of years. It felt like there was endless material that I could develop in paint and with these marks. I was thinking about tension and about edges: the tension of the paint or the marks against the tension of the shapes. And how the paint was working with the edges and the compactness of the whole shape of the canvas. It was pretty simplistic really.

After dealing with these issues for a while—though maybe I shouldn't use the term "issues"—you felt that you needed to change. How did you approach that change?

I think it was more like "anti-issue." I can feel the hair on the back of my neck bristle when I think of "issues." I think there has been so much repression in the name of issues. There always has been. I don't mean that I feel like this dummy, that those type of ideas don't come up for me. But I felt very, very strongly at that moment that I wasn't involved with issues, that issues were being taken care of by other people. The paintings did have a look but I wasn't connecting them to other work. This was a very strong time for minimal and constructivist art, and I connected myself to that but I didn't like the issues that were involved. I didn't feel like I was doing anything in terms of trying to show people what a painting could look like, or make an original kind of painting that was the first kind of painting that you could do, or a painting that was about nothing. None of those things were the least bit interesting to me.

I was much more interested in taking all the stuff that I knew and all the kinds of beautiful potentials of abstraction and making it into something very personal. That left a lot of openness between whether or not

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there was an image, whether it was an intuitive or intellectual thing going on. Primarily I think that all my work is completely intuitive. In painting there needs to be a really long relationship—love, hate, everything—both intellectual and very emotional. Because I took so much time with those paintings I learned a lot about those needs that I hadn't been really aware of before. I had been more aware of an anxiety when things went by too fast.

So how did your approach start to change?

It started to change when I started to work with shapes. I needed to go into another space and I had been thinking about working with shapes. I was bored with squares and rectangles. Shapes are nothing new and in the beginning I wasn't trying to do something original with the shape, I just wanted to work with different edges. The Russian constructivists and Mondrian, they are fascinating, but lines and squares don't ultimately continue to hold that much interest for me. If there is anything I know about myself now in terms of my work it is that change is a real pattern for me. When I started to work with shapes I didn't know why or what it was going to lead to. The

first paintings were very timid and very involved. They were primarily color paintings. Some were very mediocre. The shapes began to lead me into a whole different need to use more organic images. To figure-ground relationships. At this point I began to work much larger.

Were you seeing the shapes that you chose as being symbolic or metaphorical?

At first I couldn't. I had limited ideas about what kind of shapes I could use. And I didn't know yet how to make them. So at first they were trapezoids. I took a square and went this way or that way; they were long and they were thin. I wanted to see them in a symbolic way—it didn't feel like they were just shapes in a formal kind of sense—but I didn't know how to get it. That has changed a lot in the last few years.

How did the work feel when you started to use the shapes?

It was disconcerting to use the shapes but I was very clear about how I wanted to put the paint in them, how I wanted the paint to behave at that moment. That was something I had at that time. I lost it a couple years later. I was also fairly clear in the beginning about kinds of images and shapes I wanted inside shapes.

For about a year it was pretty easy. And then that began to fall apart—I don't know how to say it—I guess I got bored with what I was doing. It's funny—for a while your limits are very exciting, then you get to the real limits of something you are doing. There is this wonderful ascent when you get it. Then all of a sudden the limits, instead of being wonderful, these discoveries become clamps. Then you have to go forward or backtrack or whatever.

I did a couple years of these shapes, got more and more elaborate, more and more complex. I still wasn't sure why I was using the shapes, but I felt more and more interested in using shapes. The work, the paintings seemed to get more rigid, more tight. It became clear to me that the thing I needed to change was the paint inside. So basically for the last two years I have been involved in trying to soften the paint, to loosen it, to get less rigid with it, to develop different ways to think about what the paint can do.

It certainly isn't anything different than anybody else has done. But I feel more open now, I have loosened up. Primarily through working the shapes I have been able to do that. I began to get a clear feeling a couple years ago of what I wanted the shapes for. The shapes feel like catalysts; they become more like images. Which leaves me in a

situation where I can do many different things on the inside of these edges. I can be very illusionistic and go totally against the outer edges or I can play along with them. It throws up this kind of tension for me—a conflict that is quite interesting for me psychologically—the need to work out this conflict between inside and outside.

Can you talk a little about how you vary your paint surfaces, from flat to shiny and so on, and your reasons for manipulating them in those ways.

It is exciting. It is open-ended. I don't know what it will look like, it's very unpredictable. As unpredictable as things can be after you have driven a car down the same road for twenty years. You know a lot about what is going on—oil paint is oil paint. All of the changes in the surfaces, some people find them jarring and annoying actually, are something I really allow to happen. I mean I could make the surface perfectly flat or I could make it this way or that way, but the fact is that it does change unpredictably. This feels very exciting to me and very real. I like the roughness very, very much. I like the clamminess of it—I have a tendency to really over-refine things—and this gives me something that goes against part of myself. I have a tendency to tighten, really screw things down. I always have to force myself to just let the paint happen.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

How much would you say that accidents and odd occurrences play into the final resolution of the painting?

I don't think that there are any accidents. There are things that you see that you didn't predict. I mean some of it is predicted in a way. To me it is all from the unconscious, then once you start, you set yourself up for it, you find out about it. It is all there. Once it starts to get clear you think you can let it lie there and not develop it, and that makes a weak painting or weak art. In fact at that level, it's not really art. I mean we have all looked at things that are full of talent, films or books or paintings, yet we sense that that person isn't in there developing it. It is a question of making that unconscious material conscious, and really knowing it. And I don't think it is accidental.

Are you often surprised by your own work?

Sometimes I am surprised, really surprised and shocked by the images. But lately I'm working with very specific images. I've been doing these paintings of big cups with handles. And they are horrifying in some way. They are large paintings on large shaped canvases that are split apart. And there are these big splashes that are coming out of the cup. Some people don't see the cup. But I see it. I know it is there. It is a fascinating image for me--really they are funny. They are kind of cartoony--I worry if they are too cartoony.

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What drew you to that image?

I think what drew me to it is that the kind of shapes that I have been working for the last few years have gotten more and more organic, more specific to me. I did a painting of a big glass that was quite unrecognizable. It happened quite by accident. I did this glass, I did a series of paintings of beer glasses. All of a sudden this old image came back again--it was something I began to do when I first started to paint--it wasn't something I was thinking about at all. I was thinking that I really needed a change. That something was going to happen, but I didn't know what. I felt the despair of "I can't do this anymore," or, "I'll just have to quit painting." Then you make something happen. You manufacture something and it happens to be this image. I began to play around more with the cup and I don't know why.

It is very abstracted and not easy for most people to see. It is on the edge of recognition.

Some people see it and some people don't. But what really shocks me more than anything in terms of what I see in my paintings is what other people tell me they see. Sometimes I just think "Oh my God--that's incredible." Some people are

horrified by the more organic images. Well some of them are very much birth images. And they are very sexual. At times I think it's too psychological, it's too sexual. It bowls people over. And I think, "That's in me!" But that is in me. I made that image. To have that thrown back at you--what somebody else sees, likes, or is turned off by--is really amazing.

So people do read bodies and natural forms and sexuality into your work, which is not your intention, but is still part of you as a person.

Yes. But it makes me realize that it is the intention. I don't know if you have this experience where you think you are doing one thing, emotionally you are in one place, and then there is this other thing that comes out instead. It doesn't seem to be consciously intended but I think it is. That is very interesting to me. And you have to make some decisions. When I do see something that I think is silly or dumb, I'll eradicate. Or if it feels too overpowering in terms of the whole. But, it frightens me and interests me at the same time. I would really like to go with it more than censor it.

Given that you have worked a lot with the perimeters of the shaped canvas, how do you approach the inside of the canvas?

The perimeters get more and more extreme. I draw them to size before the stretchers are made so I am very familiar with the shape. Usually I have this fantasy that I know what I am going to do on the inside. Lately I have been working with these cups and each time I think I am not going to do another one. So there is some kind of compulsion going on there.

Sometimes the idea feels completely blown away because the shape is so extreme. And that is exciting too because it brings up all these possibilities. You can do anything you want and you really do so little. Art is so much about all these possibilities. The things that people invent are really incredible yet there is so little that you actually end up doing. So much of art in the last twenty years--[Sol] LeWitt, [Mel] Bochner and [Robert] Rymen--wonderful, incredible artists--so much of all that work is really about repressing those possibilities.

And there are so many limitations anyway. Letting that stuff out is the spirit of life really. Art is about the spirit of life. It is not really about the spirit of repression.

So you try to keep your mind open. You allow this process to continue. You don't try to manipulate it on any level.

I think there is a manipulation that happens in spite of oneself.

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# GLADSTONE GALLERY

There are real breaks inside of you and they are really frightening. You go at your own pace. I didn't mention this earlier, but one of the paintings that moved me most when I began to understand it is the Picasso painting, Les Femmes d'Alger. What he did in that painting was so horrendous. It is amazing that he was able to do it, to see those faces, so scary, and to let it out. That is what art is really about. Every time I see that painting, I just feel "thunk," there it is. That is the message. One has to do this, to try to be strong and try to go inside. And to understand what is going on inside. I also think that's where it can really fall apart too; you can be too indulgent. I mean it can become sort of psychologizing. Then it is like a puddle on the floor with no real edge. That is where I think the formal part comes in. That you are putting it into a context that has a kind of strict mess for making the form.

Let's talk a little bit about your use of color which has always been very extraordinary.

You mean my feelings about color or as a form in the work? I don't actually think about color very much. It's very emotional; it's not intellectualized at all. The color and the paint are one thing to me. The thickness of the paint, the stuff of the paint, is also the color. I'm very conscious of the color. And I

want the color to be very specific to the shape. For me it creates the mood, the emotion, the richness and the feeling of the painting. The real sense of the painting is in the color. When a painting isn't working one of the first things I notice is the color, usually the drawing too, but invariably it is the color. Somehow I just haven't known what the right colors are yet. Sometimes I won't know what the colors will be until the very end. The color is the syntax in the painting.

Do you find yourself reworking the colors within the shape until somehow it holds?

That's right. Until the relationships feel very right or very wrong--one or the other. Rightfully wrong maybe. I think with color that there is a kind of perverseness with me where at times I want things to be wrong. I want them to work out in very unexpected ways for me in terms of color. But I don't have any theories about color at all. None whatsoever.

Let's go back for a moment to the procedure of making a painting. You start out with a certain scale in mind and then do you make drawings for the painting or do you start intuitively and work it out?

Usually I start intuitively--I just start to paint. I just work on the canvas. Sometimes I do some drawings. I have a little book, record book, and I do little drawings inside that but they are nothing. I just throw them away, or whatever. Just with a ballpoint pen. Recently since I have had more time and energy I've been doing more drawing around the painting or for the painting. I certainly don't do a drawing before and then do the painting. That I've never done. It would kill it for me. I don't think that way. It wouldn't be a suitable way for me to work.

So there is something about the life of the process which appeals to you?

Yes. It's what I do. If I analyzed it before that I would really have nothing to do. I can virtually not imagine approaching the work that way because it is so intensely about this relationship, this time that is new and very unknown when you begin, and then gets more known and then gets unknown. It would take the life out of it completely for me to work any other way.

In the show that you had in May [1981], you began exploding the entire canvas into small canvas fragments that all fit together into a whole. Would you talk a little about the ideas that led up to that work?

That idea of using the shattered canvases feels like one of the first clear ideas that I've had in a long time. I don't think it is a great idea. Actually I think that it is a dumb idea, somewhat embarrassing. But I felt that I just had to do it. It was so clear to me, so expressive of a way I was feeling that it was simply inevitable. But the way that I came to it was by working with two other shapes meshed together in some way--which, again, happened out of sheer frustration. I was tired of working on a single unit and I just put two of the units together. I had two stretchers similarly shaped. And I put them together on the wall to see what would happen. Right away something clicked for me and just enabled me to go on.

I was very strongly connected to all of those paintings. Everything felt very emotional, very rich. And I feel like I am still in that place right now working with those broken pieces. The idea that was so satisfying for me is something that has been going on in my work for a long time. Shattered physicality in conflict with the totality of the whole unit. Now it's whole or it's broken--taking something broken and then trying to make it conceptually whole is the fundamental drive behind all those paintings.

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How did you work them structurally? They look frightfully complex.

At first it was one of those things you start when you don't realize what you are getting into. When I put them up in my studio, it was incredibly difficult to get them up. I had a plan for them and I drew what I had in mind. Then when I started to put them up on the wall, it all fell apart and it got really difficult. But the thing to keep in mind is the concept that originally they are from one shape, like a broken plate or a broken glass that one could put back together again. That is how they are built. So when they go to another place, I just make a big drawing of the whole thing on the wall and then it is easy to rehang it.

Are you still pursuing this course now?

Yes, that is what I'm still involved with. I think it is getting a little frightening because at this point I feel that I'm working very well. I don't feel that sense of frustration that comes before the change. It's a little frightening. I really don't have a sense of where it is going or what is coming up next with this. It would be nice to. Some funny things have been happening to me. I know that it is just about getting older--which seems very good to me. I feel totally good about it. But I really am beginning to feel my own limitations, and I feel this rebelliousness, that I am limited

and I can't do everything. I'm dealing with that right now. It feels sad but it also feels like there is a lot there that I can work with somehow. I don't know exactly how to say it.

Well, it seems like in this last series of work you really opened up to enormous risks. Because this kind of work is very difficult to pull off. The idea of a unified image in a fragmented image is beautiful but making it work is very complicated. It seems like you are stretching yourself in a very healthy sort of way.

Yes. I think sometimes, I think it is healthy. I think it is really good. But I guess what then gets frightening is really stretching it--is it working or isn't it working? Because of course what I am involved in--all this arcane stuff that you come from--is communicating. So that what goes on is the work is sometimes frightening to me. Is there something there that really is getting communicated?

Well, how do you evaluate that?

I think ultimately you have to evaluate it in terms of your own sense of it. Because sometimes people can give you support and you have this very strong feeling that you are reaching them but basically when you are doing the work, you are by yourself. You are really by yourself. There is an enormous unknown there. You don't think about it in a specific kind of way or else you couldn't even go on.

Well, when you think about the second part of the life of your work, the first part being you making it, what do you hope people will feel or get from your paintings?

That there is somebody home. I suppose the kind of feeling that I've gotten from looking at work that has really reached out to me. Precisely that feeling I got when I was looking at the Cezanne painting when I was 18 years old. That there is a human being there. A real warm-blooded human being is making this stuff. Basically it is quite simple but that's what I'm trying to communicate. And I think there is more to it. One thing that hasn't changed for me at all over the years is the feeling that in art there is the spirit of life and freedom--if you are being true to yourself. I think anybody can do it, too. I don't think it is an accident that in times like these I was trying so very hard to communicate more directly.

What specifically are you meaning in "times like these"?

Well, I just think it is terrible. I mean over the past few years I've gotten more political than I ever thought I would become since the 1960s. I just think that this is a time of enormous repression. The people

who are running the government are very dangerous people. Not evil, but very dangerous. The stuff that is going on feels like it is going to seriously affect all of us. I would like to not look at politics and all that stuff, and just sort of deal with my work, but it's impossible to do that, especially in New York. It is all around you. I have very intense feelings about it.

Just following this train of thought, how do you think that art can help in times like these?

I think by virtue of what I was just saying. I mean it is not an accident that one of the first things that every repressive regime does, like the Nazi's, is to get rid of the art. They put a strangle-hold on the art because it is unconventional, because it brings things up that is a totalitarian society nobody wants anybody to know about or feel. I think it is because it's about spirit, it's about freedom, about sex, it's about your mind and it's about people--it is human, it is really very human. I think that is precisely what it has to offer, what people ultimately really need. That is why art is destroyed, or completely put away. And they can never really do it--which is real interesting.

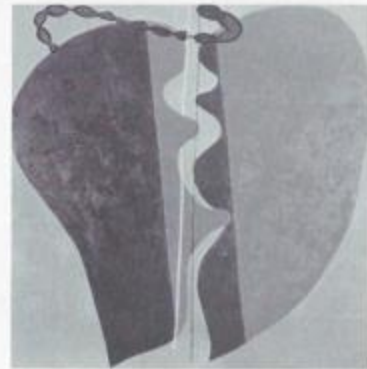
Art is powerful. It is not powerful like a cannon shot that is going to murder people. Art really does powerful stuff which is why people are afraid of it. It is going to change you if you let it in. It will make you change. It talks about freedom.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

We are making it because we want to be free of kinds of restrictions. And when people see it who don't make it, even if they connect with it on very strange levels, they know what it is all about. It is about somebody saying, "I want to be free."

Through working, there is definitely a revelation about yourself as a painter and also as a person. What kind of revelation do you see about yourself, your work, from working?

I think that my art has helped me to like myself a lot better--that, most of all. It taught me--through my being able to make myself do it, continue it and go deeper into myself and through it--that I am not so bad. That I can be honest, or if honesty doesn't matter, that I can be direct. That I can express what I am feeling from my heart and soul in one place at least, in my life. That feels like the most positive part of it. Because I feel like I came to making art from a place that was very closed off from my feelings and the world, and I had to close myself off from the world even more to do it for a period of time. It is something that has really helped me back into the world.



Top: Sabr, 1978, oil on canvas, 46" X 60"  
Bottom: Jain, 1980, oil on canvas, 132" X 120"

GLADSTONE GALLERY

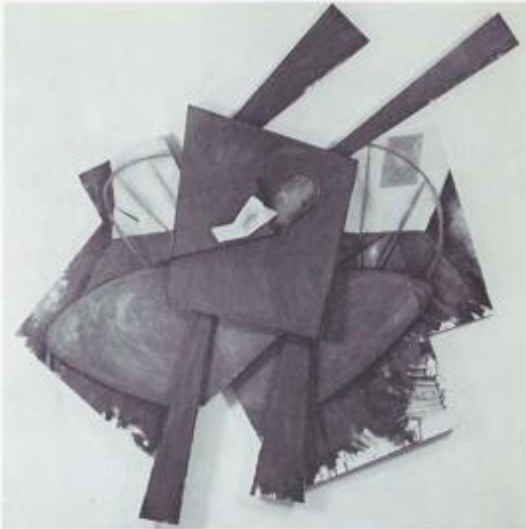


Painter's Progress, 1980-81, oil on canvas, 114" X 96"



Art Part, 1981, oil on canvas, 115" X 124"; Photo: Geoffrey Clements

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More Than You Know, 1983, oil on canvas, 111" X 106" x 8"  
Photo: evva-inkeri

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