

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Barbara Rose, "Elizabeth Murray: The Shape of Things to Come," *Vogue*, July 1987

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Elizabeth Murray is much too publicity-shy to be an art world "star," but her witty canvases about the lunacy of everyday life have made her one of the most respected artists of this generation

By BARBARA ROSE

The stunning drama of Elizabeth Murray's works seems at odds with her physical presence. A small, fragile, sensitive woman, Murray is the unlikely author of a series of huge painted canvas constructions that have brought her international acclaim. She is an anomaly on the current art scene—a homebody who hates publicity. Born in Chicago in 1940, she is married to a poet and is the mother of three children; she produces work slowly, according to her own rhythm and not to popular demand. Yet, among her fellow artists, among critics and curators, she is perhaps the most widely respected painter of the generation that took the spotlight in the 'eighties.

Now, the first major retrospective of Murray's painting will, as it travels around the country, bring her work before a wider public.

Perched high on a ladder in her vast, bare TriBeCa loft in downtown New York City, Murray concentrates on paint-



Elizabeth
Murray: the shape of things to come

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ing and repainting a small fire-engine-red rectangular area at the top of her latest construction. She attacks her task with energy and confidence, finally arriving at the precise degree of vibrating crimson she wants to contrast with an adjacent acid-green. She speaks softly, seemingly oblivious to the outside world; like her paintings, Murray's words come slowly and they mean something. "My paintings evolve in an organic way," she says. "I have no set of preconceived ideas in mind. Certain kinds of shapes emerge, are changed, modified until I feel they are integrated and resolved. I started painting on flat canvases, but gradually they became split, then fractured, then shaped. Now, they are more and more three-dimensional."

Murray's bulbous, humanoid forms, which seem to communicate with one another, are unmistakably her own—witty and wild transformations of things seen in art and contemporary signs and symbols. Neither dogmatic nor self-consciously involved with the principles of "high art" or Euclidian geometry, she has no need to proclaim her obvious seriousness and commitment.

Within the tradition of modernism, hers is one of the most original expressions in contemporary art; yet Murray freely admits the influence of Pop Art's boldness and Minimalism's insistence on structural coherence—as evidenced by Frank Stella's shaped paintings, for instance—as well as many other past artistic innovations. Her aim is not to deny the achievements of history, but to confront them head on. Murray is not petty; her ambition is not for trivial, ephemeral "stardom," but for a permanent place in the pantheon of the masters. And this is the niche she has gradually, systematically carved out for herself by synthesizing the most

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Elizabeth Murray and her daughter Daisy, in her studio with "War and Peace" (left) and "Pompeii" (right), both 1987.

Hans Namuth

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critically innovative changes in painting since Cubism. Passing up the current modishness of easy art, dumb art, bad art, she makes difficult art, intelligent art, beautiful art, without annihilating art history with insults, stealing its reproduced images, or rupturing continuity with the rich legacy of modernism simply for the sake of chic cynicism.

Taking me over to a corner of the studio where a carpentry shop is set up, Murray shows me the small clay models, maquettes for the large constructions. Again, she shapes the contours in an intuitive rather than a conceptual fashion. Then, an assistant enlarges the undulating maquette by building a complex wooden chassis. Seen from behind, the stretchers resemble the scooped-out hulls of boats; once the canvas is anchored tautly over the spiny armature, a subtly curved, streamlined surface is ready for Murray's offbeat shapes and colors.

Murray's constructed paintings, unlike Stella's fabricated metal reliefs, are not assembled as collage from a series of angled plates. One of the mysteries of her work is how she manages to create uninterrupted surfaces that billow out into space with the naturalness of breathing.

Nothing machine-made, mechanically applied, or repetitious is involved in her way of thinking and working; each piece is a struggle whose resolution cannot be achieved in a series that merely duplicates the initial discovery.

In her commitment to the uniqueness of each individual work of art, and her rejection of the mindless repetitions and formulas of Pop, Minimal, and Color Field painting, Murray aligns herself with the generation of her "artistic" grandparents: the "action painters" like Pollock, De Kooning, Kline, and Krasner. For them, each work was a battle for harmony, a battle that could be won only by resisting the impulse to give way to undisciplined expression.

Looking at Murray's funky, organic, twisting forms, fitting together like a puzzle, or like Plato's version of true lovers who seek their other

halves for completion, one feels the intense erotic metaphor that gives her art its strange power. The miracle is the subtlety of Murray's statement, and her ability to communicate content through allusion that sets her apart from artists with less poetic temperaments. But it is her personal honesty, as well as her generosity to other artists (whom she embraces as openly as her bulging forms hug each other), that makes her refreshing in today's hypercompetitive environment.

For a soft-spoken person, Murray is unusually intense. Her face, with its strong, mobile features, is framed by long, grey hair. Her expression suggests a compassionate spirit that has loved deeply and learned much about the give-and-take relationships that inspire her coupled creatures. She radiates a kind of experiential wisdom, achieved at a price few are willing to pay now that we acclaim artists who spend their hours pursuing comfort and avoiding suffering.

In short, Murray is the imaginative custodian of a tradition she is helping both to keep alive and to change. Her work is strong but not aggressive, whimsical but serious, allusive and open to personal interpretation rather than closed in a system of arcane meaning. Sophisticated but not snobby, it operates simultaneously on many levels. Murray has a highly formal understanding of how color and structure can be united in a three-dimensional image; but she breaks new ground in the way she foreshortens shapes into disappearance while ironically using literal protrusions to snap the eye back and forth between real and illusionistic space. Color, structure, space, shape, as well as emotional content and the life-enhancing feeling of looking at forms that dance and move to the rhythms of our times—that is what authentic art is about. And Elizabeth Murray is not about to let anybody forget it.

The Murray retrospective opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles on July 28 and travels to the Des Moines Art Center, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and finally to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. A beautiful, fully illustrated monograph (Harry N. Abrams) accompanies the exhibition. ▽