

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Robert Storr, "Shape Shifter," *Art in America*, April 1989



Shape Shifter

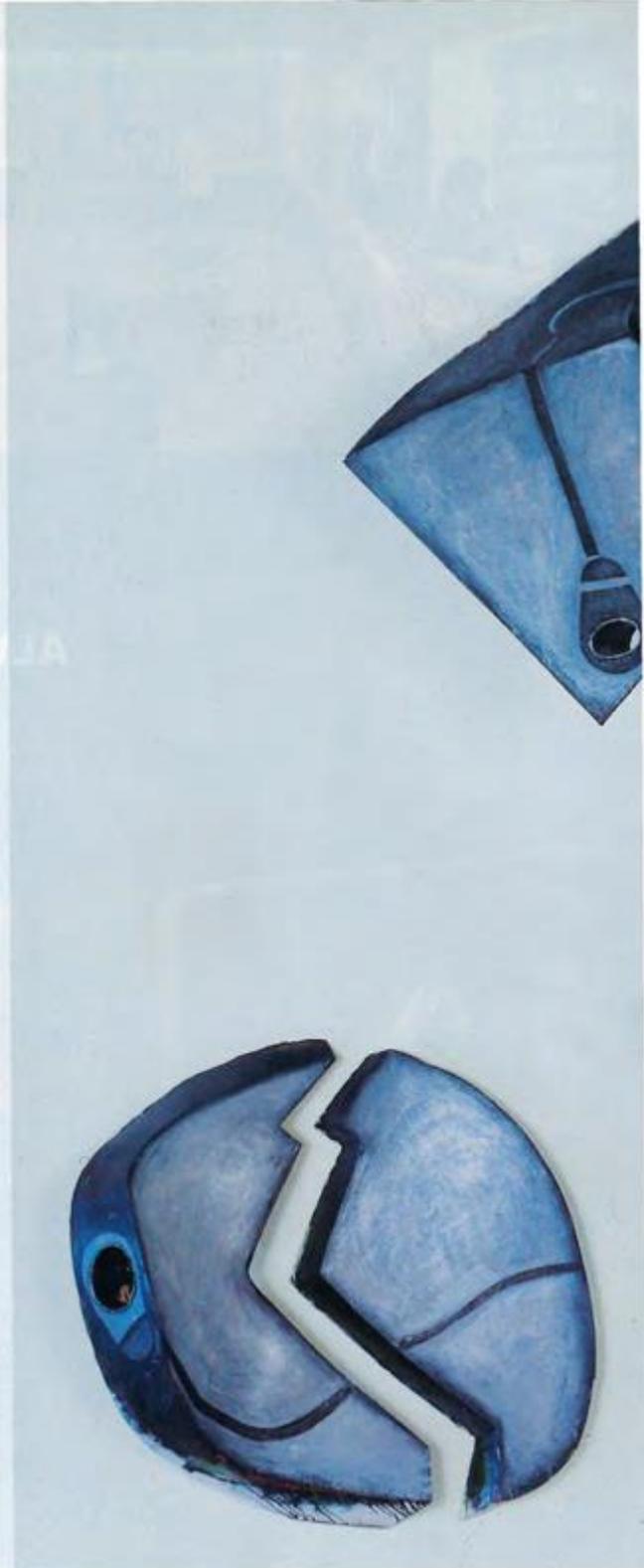
Twisting and stretching both the real and illusionistic space commanded by her paintings, Elizabeth Murray breaks ground as she breaks the rules.

BY ROBERT STORR

Art in the '80s has been an inquiry into the estate of formalism. The trial has been protracted, and the verdict is still out. It will, of course, never be delivered, since no impartial judge can be found. The object of this exercise, then, is not so much to settle the issue of formalism's original value as to redistribute the spoils. The process began in the late '70s when artists of various tendencies once again began making pictures. For "Neo-Expressionists" this return to figuration was an overt act of defiance in the face of "mainstream" modernism's outlawing of mimesis. For "deconstructivists," many of whom had been schooled in the Greenbergian verities, the ironic reintroduction of long-exiled images occasioned a semiotic manhunt for the hidden or banished "texts" contained in representations of both a high and low order. Despite their supposed and sometimes actual antagonisms, restoration painting and critical appropriation together conspired to overthrow the anti-literary premises of formalist orthodoxy.

The second stage of this investigation has focused on abstraction, formalism's true domain and ultimate redoubt. Here, the petitioners have been ostensibly abstract painters. In the 1960s and '70s, some, like David Diao and Olivier Mosset, were in fact favored sons of their respective branches of the larger modernist family. (Diao's recent work in particular betrays a refined disgruntlement; if you don't stand to inherit, it seems to suggest, sue.) Meanwhile, the practitioners of "Neo-Geo," combining retro-cheek images with nouveau-smart arguments, have accepted the purely visual restrictions of non-objective art only to demonstrate that no such thing exists. Collectively, Peter Schuyff, Philip Taaffe, Peter Halley and Sherrie Levine, in "re-presenting" the clichéd emblems of hard-edge abstraction, sought to prove that all paintings are symbols of ideas about art or pictures of prototypical paintings. Someone had stripped formalism of its assets, they asserted, and it was an inside job.

While these mostly young artists have pursued their case, older formalists of various pedigrees have gone about spending their legacy in more or less interesting ways. As with any form of inheritance, an esthetic benefaction can be well or badly used according to the ingenuity and the grace with which its resources are deployed. Some of these legatees artists have lived well and productively on their income, but too many have raided their capital or otherwise frittered away their share, complaining that it was not larger to begin with. Not content to husband his fortune, Frank



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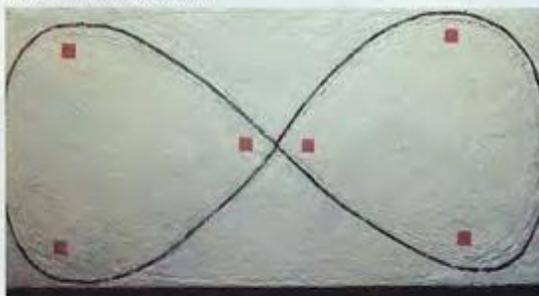


*Cracked Question, 1987,
oil on six canvases,
161 1/2 by 19 1/2 by 23 1/2 inches.
Satchi Collection, London.
All photos this article
courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery.*

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Above, *Blue Inside Outside, 1974*,
oil on canvas, 28 by 46 inches.
Below, *Möbius Banal, 1974*,
oil on canvas, 14 by 28 inches.



Grateful to Minimalism for the bounds it set upon the turmoil that has always motivated her, Murray nonetheless rejects the notion of "problem-solving" art.

Stella, the scion of formalism, has rebelled against the privileges he so early claimed. The genealogical ties that bind do so more strongly than he anticipated, however, and the perquisites of primogeniture are more compromising than he imagined.

Overly subscribed and too heavily mortgaged to sustain its intended beneficiaries, formalism now seems like a loosely held family firm ripe for dismemberment. Its predicament is not just the fault of human nature or a necessary cycle in the turn of history. There is a more basic problem. Having professed an exclusive knowledge of painting's essential mechanisms, formalism was driven to the promise of constant innovation, an endless supply of better mousetraps. By the late 1960s, however, formalism could no longer deliver the goods on schedule, if it could deliver them at all. For some of those involved, critics especially, this crisis of production prompted apocalyptic visions; those suddenly deprived of what they think is a guaranteed livelihood tend to mistake ordinary hard times for the end of the world. For others, formalism's penchant for austerity devolved into a kind of genteel poverty—a making do with less.

Creation of new wealth, however, requires more than refinement

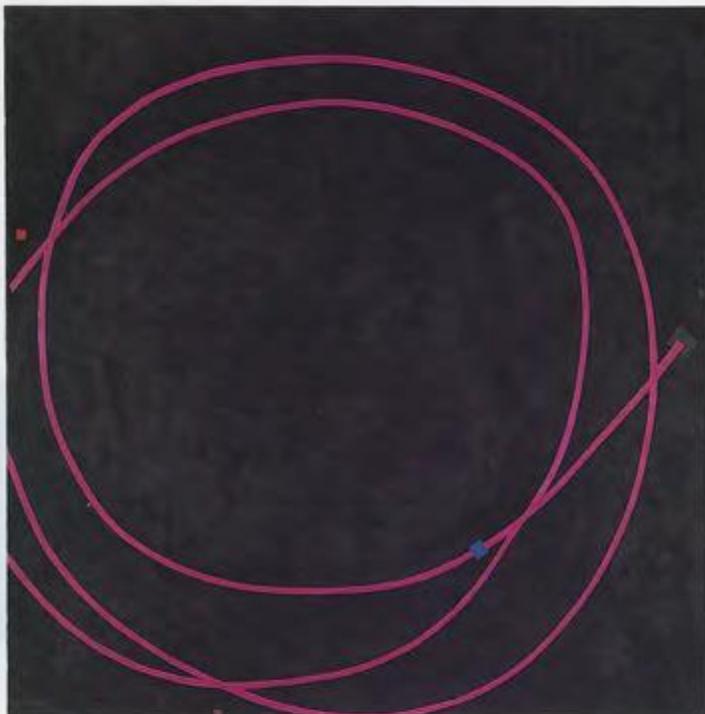
of acquired technology. Fresh paradigms are in constant demand, and a fundamental retooling is often necessary when decorum reigns; new energy and new ideas must come from outside the established framework. Someone has to break the rules—either not knowing they exist, or, in the spirit of a generous rather than churlish anarchy, not caring. Elizabeth Murray has proved to be exactly this kind of iconoclast, and she persists even as we struggle to catch up with the inventiveness and authority of what she has already accomplished. Her recent retrospective affirmed Murray's present preeminence in no uncertain terms. Organized by Kathy Halbreich and Sue Graze, and enlarged by more recent work for its final stop at the Whitney Museum, the show was, in fact, one of the very few such overviews devoted to an artist of the '80s—those of Jonathan Borofsky and Cindy Sherman are the two others that come quickly to mind—in which one sensed that the purpose was not to certify a career or codify a manner but rather to initiate the public into a unique process of making and looking, reviewing what had happened but preparing it as well for what is to come.¹ Heretofore Murray had been a "painter's painter," but the show made it inescapably plain to anyone proposing to pass on the fate of painting that henceforth Murray's business is their business.

This is not the first time, of course, that the artistic "mainstream" has been replenished by someone previously regarded as peripheral to it; think of Louise Bourgeois, H.C. Westermann, Bruce Nauman, Eva Hesse.² The analytic difficulty posed by such unexpected infusions of ideas is that the individual responsible for overcoming the artistic obstacles to the energies of others may not in fact have set out to do so, or at any rate may not have given priority to that particular task. The contribution such an artist may make to the esthetic community at large may indeed be the by-product of another larger and more personal aim. If anything, Murray has taken a position against the view that art in general and painting in particular are issues-determined.³ Grateful to Minimalism for the discipline it afforded her and the boundaries it set upon the turmoil that has from the beginning motivated her art, Murray has remained in open revolt against the detached and becalming discourse of "problem-solving."

Saturated hues; jutting and twisting elements of relief; and a general imagistic tumult of swollen shapes, household objects and writhing limbs typify the direct, at times almost overwhelming address of her work. Consistent with this emotional urgency and sensory immediacy, her formal intuitions always resonate with existential as opposed to merely art-historical significance, and like all psychic experiences they deepen with duration. Although geometry is for her a central concern, she has never dealt with it in an essentialist or Platonic way; shapes in her work are no less subject than bodies to twisting, tearing, shoving and touching, construction and deconstruction.⁴ Theory notwithstanding, physical engagement is the condition of most substantial painting and sculpture. The Abstract Expressionists pushed themselves to move *into* their paintings. The Minimalists challenged the viewer to enter the phenomenological field of sculpture. Where Greenbergian formalism privileged an incorporeal eye, Murray, like her Action-Painting elders and her near contemporaries among the object-makers of the 1960s and '70s, has always kept the body in play. Even before her work began to shoulder itself off the wall or clamp the viewer in its embrace, Murray knew that wrestling with paintings was not the same as shadowboxing with the picture plane; painting, she has since shown, could and would tie the artist in knots if the artist did not best painting by the same means first.

Murray's refusal to walk the walk or talk the talk of "high style" vanguardism has cost her. Full recognition has until now been

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*Pink Spiral Leap, 1975,
oil on canvas, 78 by 76 inches.
Baltimore Museum of Art.*

begrudged her, it would seem, precisely because of the upsetting choice she embodies: a stubborn indifference to guaranteed results and an apparently unquenchable eagerness to see what can be made to happen next. Thus, while she has gathered a growing number of partisans, to some art-world factions well entrenched in their critical or curatorial positions and secure in their "mainstream" prejudices, it has been convenient to ignore Murray—or to typecast her. Language is key: "punk" and "feminine" are among the epithets that frequently crop up in informal discussion of her work. Even when uttered as praise, in the present polemical context such terms nonetheless tend to marginalize or subtly discount her achievement in relation to standards of "quality," "purity" or the postmodernist shibboleth of "criticality." To forswear such terms, however, is implicitly to concede the authority of those ideas as well as to misrepresent the substance of Murray's achievement. Indeed, while Murray is neither doing "woman's work" nor making avowedly "feminist" art, the situations presented and emotions evinced by her pictures reflect a decidedly female perspective. Despite her many imitators of both sexes, certainly no male artist has made paintings similar in substance or equal in resonance to hers. Further, as rigorous and original as her work is in its conception, Murray's execution makes no concessions to good esthetic table manners. Although rich in its painterly "cuisine" and vivid in its design, her art exempts itself from, and implicitly criticizes, the Greenbergian canon of the "decorative" modern by virtue of its unhesitant and often rough facture—in other words, its funkiness.

"High style" or "low," most disconcerting to many seems to be the apparent insouciance and sometime gaiety of Murray's work. In

truth, Murray's retrospective at the Whitney Museum was an occasion to rejoice. The embarrassment that such a prospect may cause among those who have come to view modernism as a fraud or tragic failure is tonic. After all, not only do such attitudes misconstrue present circumstances, they misrepresent the past. Indeed, if post-modernism means anything, it is an end to terminal arguments and the historical mystifications and omissions necessary to maintaining millennial beliefs of all kinds, be they wildly optimistic or, as at present, steadfastly grim. At best, both past utopias and current dystopias are instructive fables. Reifying them—that is to say, treating the abstractions upon which they are predicated as matters of literal fact—transforms such fictions into a principal cause rather than a useful description of, or hypothetical antidote to, our contemporary malaise. Meanwhile, "life," in its hopelessly muddled but intermittently satisfying actuality, goes on. Indeed, it has *always* been "the best of times and the worst of times," and modernism's critical practice has always been complemented by celebratory urges.

Henri Matisse and Stuart Davis, in particular, remind us that the 20th century wasn't just a raw deal. Like Murray's, their art is infused by vitality and dedicated to the actual. More than her immediate antecedents, indeed, these two artists are her companions. With Matisse, Murray shares an exquisite sensitivity to the erotics of color; with Davis, a robust instinct for the sheer materiality of paint. For the former, pleasure was totally available to the eye; for the latter it was all pulse and pressure. Fusing the nuanced optical dazzle of the one and the no-nonsense urban physicality of

By the late 1970s, Murray's pictorial dramas increasingly derived their real strength from the heightening formal tension between container and contained.

the other, the flushed, eccentric configurations of Murray's pictures mud wrestle exuberantly on, with no holds barred.

This is not "don't worry, be happy" painting, however. Nor is it any more available to complacent spirits than rap or reggae music is to Bush-league boosters. Moreover, the chronology of Murray's work tells a tale. Of the paintings in the show, the most antic or syncretic, such as *Children Meeting*, belong to the mid- to late 1970s, that is to say, before the age of Reagan. Since then, for reasons which remain partly obscure and private even as they reflect the grinding and demoralizing iniquities of these neo-conservative times, Murray's art has bespoken an increasing unease and pain.

Although concerned lest they be seen as crudely symbolic, Murray has even encouraged a contextual reading of her paintings. "I want my work to reflect my feelings about the society we live in; it's political in that sense," she recently said in an interview with Lilly Wei published in these pages [see *A.I.A.*, July '87]. In a conversation with Kate Horsfield recorded for the Video Data Bank in 1982, the period from which this shift in mood dates, Murray went further: "Over the past couple of years I've gotten more political than I ever thought I would since the 1960s. I just think this is a time of enormous repression. The people who are running the government are very dangerous people. . . . I would like not to look at politics and all that stuff and just . . . 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." In character with the vernacular tone and the high-keyed formats she favors, however, this anguish often appears in the guise of whimsy.

For instance, a large painting in which a massive table splits apart like the San Andreas Fault is titled *Don't Be Cruel*, after the Elvis Presley classic; another, *Chain Gang*, follows suit, using the Sam Cooke song to refer to the arduousness of artistic labor.⁵ Such allusions or verbal hints are sometimes directly paralleled by painterly forms of address. *Can You Hear Me?*, whose title amplifies a perfectly ordinary query into an edgy plea, features a small ghostly head from which emanate a pair of swelling armlike shapes painted a chill blue tinged with acid yellow, and a single inflated exclamation-point form painted red and acid green. The face is a direct reference to the contorted visage of the figure in Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, while the monstrous blue extensions are something we have not seen before; or rather something we have never seen in a form at once so abstract and so visceral.⁶ Replacing the text of comic-strip balloons with colors that vibrate in the eye as a dissonant shriek would resonate in the ear, Murray has effected a kind of synesthetic pun.

Elsewhere, even more disquieting polyps appear without explanation. *Kitchen* depicts the black silhouette of a peristaltically elongated woman against a harsh yellow background, cradling—though given the specific object of her attention that scarcely seems the word—a huge flaccid spoon that blushes livid pink and green. "I don't know whether the figure is the cook or the eater," Murray says in a catalogue caption. Whoever she is, she has eaten the wrong mushroom and finds herself in a Wonderland that is not for the squeamish. Of late, other devices typical of Murray's paintings have taken on equally ambiguous and ominous connotations.

For a while now, Murray has made a habit of incorporating into her graphic work the nubbins of chalk or pastel with which she draws. Pinioning the engorged and slippery forms of her newest works on paper just as her signature dots had previously regulated the jostling of her earlier hard-edge shapes, these relief elements lend a process-derived matter-of-factness to Murray's recent drawings. However, in *Soon*, a 1988 painting added to the Whitney version of the exhibition, nipples of pigment similar to the stubs in the drawings appear on a streaked and mottled ground animated by flailing limblike protrusions. Whether leftover oil sticks or deliberately constructed nodules, these bumps blossom like lesions from the picture's jaundiced skin. Like the malignant warts that stud Ross Bleckner's black paintings or the *malerisch* sores in Anselm Kiefer's drawing entitled *Kranke Kunst*, they seem to be another of the ever more numerous and intrusive emblems of mortality to be found in recent art.

Symbolic in other ways are the gummy surfaces, spectral smudges and woozy contours that with great frequency now appear in counterpoint to the clear, bright facture that had heretofore been Murray's hallmark. Expressive of the uncertainties and alarms of the times, Murray's darker palette and anxious touch also serve to elaborate the increasingly complex skeleton and tense musculature of her pictures. At once gut-turning and thrilling, her images vibrate optically with the stresses she has learned to place upon her canvases. The queasiness they sometimes occasion is that which accompanies a headlong leap into space, and Murray's has indeed been a very big leap forward. No one, to date, has gone as far as she in testing the tensile strength of the traditional structure of painting while managing to maintain a sense of the whole. A kind of pictorial yoga, Murray's work is an exercise in matter over mind—or, at any rate, in hands-on making over programmatic thinking—and, as such, an object lesson in what can, rather than what "should," be done to a painting.

Murray has done just about everything. In the early 1970s, after nearly a decade of post-art-school experiments with Pop-related painting, object-making and installation work, she laid out her cards in series of small abstract paintings. These include several images of basic grids and equally simple Möbius strips that are in hindsight indicative of the difficult choice of formal templates that was already confronting her. The retrospective's single greatest weakness was the exclusion of any examples of this early work. Lamentable not merely in that many of these paintings are interesting in their own right, their absence obscures the manner in which Murray's full-blown "style" has from the outset been determined by a preoccupation with fundamentals. This crucial curatorial lapse was worsened by the scant attention paid to the next and much larger-scaled group of paintings in which Murray proceeded to pack her traditional easel format with arcing bars and bulbous shapes that flex and expand against their rectangular confines. She then tipped the rectangular ground in the manner of Mondrian's diamond paintings, further accelerating the washing-machine tumble of elements within.

From the late 1970s onward, Murray's pictorial scenarios became increasingly rowdy and her vocabulary gradually more imagistic and cartoony. The show began its fuller coverage here. While these pictures still hung flat, their overriding drama continued to derive from the heightening formal tension between container and contained. Alternatively congested and expansive, both the design and the contents of her canvases seemed to have taken on a life of their own. In *Tug* (1977), for example, the eccentric polygon of the

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Heart and Mind, 1981,
oil on two canvases,
111 1/2 by 114 inches.
Museum of Contemporary Art,
Los Angeles.

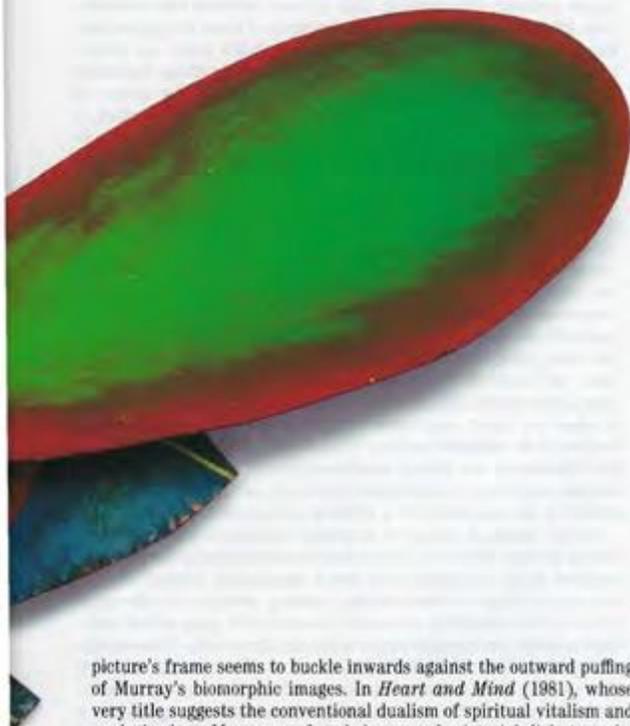
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Can You Hear Me? 1984,
oil on four canvases,
106 by 159 by 12 inches.
Dallas Museum of Art.

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In fleshing out the dimensions of her work, Murray has altered basic assumptions regarding the spatial mathematics and, consequently, the pictorial dynamics, of painting overall.



picture's frame seems to buckle inwards against the outward puffing of Murray's biomorphic images. In *Heart and Mind* (1981), whose very title suggests the conventional dualism of spiritual vitalism and analytic rigor, Murray confounded any such pictorial dichotomy by juxtaposing rectilinear to curvilinear forms while alternately enveloping each within the other. A jagged lightninglike form thus traverses a cloud-shaped panel in the top half of this picture, while in the bottom half a pneumatic black figure mirroring the contour of the upper stretcher is pinched inside a zigzag panel that virtually replicates the image of the blue bolt above. From the same year as *Heart and Mind*, *Painters' Progress* reverses this tension between inward-pulling and outward-pressing forces: expansion of the image takes precedence over (or compensates for) the contraction of the various parts. This effect Murray achieves by shattering the flat physical support of the painting into irregularly shaped canvases which are in turn reunified by the ovoid forms that spread over them and are now the clearly recognizable images of both a palette with brushes and the painter's head and scanning eye.

After 1981 this process of fragmentation and recombination proceeded at an ever more hectic pace. Dimpling and splitting at the seams like overinflated Mae Wests, jackknifing across the wall like collapsing lawn chairs, and separating into thick stands like pizza dough, Murray's pictorial structures underwent a spasmodic meta-

morphosis that followed to material extremes the primary logic of their internal graphic permutations.

Between 1984 and 1986 the two-dimensional arcs and angles that had thus far articulated the contours of Murray's wall-hugging paintings burst forth as three-dimensional projections into the viewer's space. Looping attenuated canvas fragments together like the strands of a fakir's knot, as in *Gga*, or distending a painting's contours as if it were a rubber sheet, as in *Open Book*, or, finally, giving the picture's silly-putty surface a complete 180-degree twist at the corners, as in *Making It Up*, Murray abolished all but the most vestigial distinction between hard and soft shapes, as well as between the inside and outside of her forms. In so doing, Murray recapitulated in the format of painting many of the plastic transformations Claes Oldenburg had previously explored in sculpture, and as with Oldenburg, Murray's homely icons—tables, chairs, glasses, cups—exuded an irrepressible sexual energy.

While enjoying the full range of these sculptural possibilities, Murray resolutely remains a painter. Probing real space in all sorts of ways, her paintings still never entirely detach themselves from their mural support. To the contrary. In her most recent work exposing the bare wood of jigsaw-cut and heavily cantilevered stretchers, she draws special attention to the juncture between the makeshift baroque architecture of her pictures and the fastidiously boxy architecture of the contemporary gallery/museum. One is made to wonder if, taking root in the walls on which they are exhibited, these spectacular organisms might not inject their spore into their rigid host and so trigger equally strange and wonderful mutations.

Meanwhile, Murray's complex manipulations of relief—involving beveled edges, cylindrical and elliptical perforations, contorted corners and deliberately warped surfaces—are further elaborated by the variety of her painterly attack. With her repertoire of effects, from rubbery pigmented skins and rich claylike impastos to the brilliant spectral drips at the margins and joints of her canvases, Murray has revealed herself the most willfully painterly painter of her or more recent generations. Neither a suave technician like Marden or Clemente, nor a bravura performer like Schnabel or Fischl, she is instead the complete pragmatist who, unafraid of making a mess, revels in every degree of light, from aerated to leaden, that paint can produce, and she takes fervent interest in all the elemental states, from liquid to solid, that this miraculous muck can assume.

Fleshing her work out in each of these many dimensions, Murray has transformed not merely the appearance but the fundamental structure of shaped-canvas painting. In the process, moreover, she has altered basic assumptions regarding the spatial mathematics and pictorial dynamics of painting as a whole. This discovery has set her work apart from that of her predecessors, and, it is not too much to say, has earned Murray a significant place in art history. Precedents do exist, to be sure. As already mentioned, Oldenburg is of crucial importance and, before him, Walt Disney, in his early "perpetual motion" cartoons. To a lesser but still significant degree, the basic syntax of Murray's paintings also draws upon the examples of Ellsworth Kelly, Al Held, Charles Hinman and, less obviously perhaps but more importantly, Ron Gorchov, an underrated painter whom the artist herself has acknowledged as an influence. Gorchov's saddle-shaped Minimal paintings are the custom compact models of the polychrome stretch that Murray now drives.⁷

Like many radical inventions, Murray's breakthrough has been generally overlooked because it is so simple. At once far-reaching in its implications and breathtakingly obvious in its basic assumptions, it leaves the persnickety pictorial accountants and hairsplitting

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Gga, 1984, oil on canvas, 115 by 96 inches.
Collection Ira Weinstein, Scarsdale, N.Y.

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apologists of late formalism in the dust. Like all such inventions, moreover, Murray’s completely subsumes the incremental steps that preceded it by addressing first principles. Murray has mastered form as a cause, not merely dealt with it as an effect. Mathematical at its root and structural in its realization, this shift in paradigm forces a reconsideration of the enduring antagonism between Cubism and Surrealism.

Fracturing the Albertian space of traditional painting, and paralleling the researches of modern mathematicians, Cubism called into question the Euclidean axioms upon which Renaissance perspective had been predicated. The Cubists sought, in fact, to gain access to higher mathematical dimensions while continuing to make use of the grid as the basic structural unit.⁸ Meanwhile, Surrealist biomorphism, in choosing to serve as the emblem of a melting or sexually responsive universe, in effect relegated itself to a largely depictive, as opposed to analytic or generative, function. Sculpture alone seemed to profit from biomorphism’s implicit challenge to spatial conventions; the extruded monoliths of Arp, the organic knots and

reversible skins of Louise Bourgeois, and the “Endless House” of designer and architect Frederick Kiesler are all clearly the fruit of this challenge.⁹ In painting, however, such potentially dynamic configurations were forced to inhabit the flat, squared-off world of the standard easel picture.

Converging in American painting of the 1940s and ’50s, Cubism and Surrealism fell increasingly at odds—yielding in consequence ever more reductive and problematic results. In purely formal terms Abstract Expressionism can be viewed as the struggle between the two distinct mathematical models that lie behind each tendency—planar geometry and topology. Only gesture mediated the contradictions inherent in Action Painting’s amalgam of these two paradigms, weaving, as it did most completely in Pollock’s work, an all-over spatial fabric capable of adhering to, but also exerting maximum tension upon, the pictorial rectangle. By replacing the notion of picture plane, a Euclidean concept, with that of picture surface, a topological one, Murray has now found a way to make a painting in which the format obeys the same spatial rules as an organic or biomorphic “image.”

This imaginative leap yields not only further possible design permutations, but also new kinds of meaning. The essential problem of topology is that of pursuing permanence in change, discerning the fundamental continuity of forms which at first glance would seem in fact to have no palpable similarities. Planar geometry emphasizes measurement and calculates differences between lines, polygons or polyhedra by taking strict account of lengths or angles. Topology, on the other hand, attends to more subtle if more rudimentary distinctions and similarities between mathematical constructs founded upon a more basic definition of their properties, such as the number of edges an object may have or the relation between inside and outside of an enclosed surface. Thus a torus and sphere, which in Euclidean terms are utterly non-homologous, are considered homeomorphic according to topological principles; so too an inflated basketball is the equivalent of a deflated and crumpled one.¹⁰

Merely creating visual or analytical puzzles is not the point, though graphic artist M.C. Escher has shown how easily they may be conjured up by the topologically astute imagination. Besides offering an artist a range of novel shapes, topology admits of a liberating philosophical possibility, an orderly conception of space which nonetheless allows for constant and drastic transformations. Whereas the already battered modernist grid seems to offer painting only two choices, ever greater fragmentation and breakdown or rigid repetition and entropic dispersal, topological manipulation promises a complex, elastic and infinitely variable working space. Turning cup forms into donutlike rings while also making use of knots, warped parallelograms and Möbius-striplike ribbons, Murray’s paintings incorporate, but never merely illustrate, key examples of topological transformation and equivalency, just as her process—bending, twisting, stretching and elongating—recapitulates the basic topological operations. By using cut-paper patterns and clay maquettes to design her stretchers, Murray avails herself of every means of achieving in her final work the extreme plasticity that seems most to interest her.

The fact that in some quarters Murray’s achievement is still slighted—most commonly in Europe, where her work has regularly been omitted from survey exhibitions and only rarely finds mention in the press—is all the more curious in light of the seemingly unlimited prospect she has opened up to painters who daily decry painting’s staleness. A variety of factors are involved. For hard-core proponents of non-objective art, one clear objection is that Murray’s work is not really abstract at all. While true, any such categorical imposition of the figurative/non-figurative distinction is

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*Kitchen Painting, 1985,
oil on two canvases,
81 by 58 by 14 inches.
Collection Paula Cooper.*

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*Tomorrow, 1988,
oil on two canvases,
111½ by 132½ by 21½ inches.
Private collection, Japan.*

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of little help to those who might readily apply the lessons of her work in purely abstract ways. Further, such puristic notions of abstract painting tend to ignore the fact that although Cubism was a laboratory for abstraction, none of the original Cubists ever forsook representation entirely.

Worse, such objections obscure the unforeseen formal consequences of Murray's return to figuration. While her images exist as such, they also occupy space within the paintings and, most importantly, demand that still more space be made available to them. Having made an earlier and still upright appearance in 1970, Murray's spilling glasses of the 1980s, like her exploding coffee cups of the same period, are, in the most obvious sense, the emblems of her project. Symbols of a topsy-turvy, even cataclysmic domesticity, they stand—or rather fall—for the literal overthrow of the stable base of still-life painting. Fractured by the distension and twisting of their pictorial grounds, Murray's tables are at once surrogate actors in scenes of striking emotional intimacy and available tools for a physics experiment in which perspective is tested until it can no longer accommodate the convolutions the mind can conceive. "Any thing is real that the artist can imagine," David Smith said, but clearly not all spatial constructions can bear the same stress. With Smith, an empirical and proudly "vulgar" genius who also struggled to reconcile the formal and poetic discrepancies between Cubism and Surrealism, Murray shares the courage of this conviction.

She is keenly aware, moreover, of the marvelous freedom of movement that thinking the unthinkable can afford the eye and mind. In *Making It Up*, for example, she paints a table-leg spiraling "into" the illusionistic blue void of the canvas, while the armature over which it has been stretched at that point twists "out" into the physical space of the viewer. In *This Pair (For H.T.)* (1988) she renders the full volumes of a clunky shoe just inside the edges of a form of identical configuration, such that while the painted image drops back into a hollow illusionistic space, the structure on which she has painted

swells out as a volume in real space. As Murray folds each rendered volume into and around the other, convexity and concavity assume an oxymoronic but perceptually infrangible compound state.

Replete with conundrums of this kind, Murray's work shows an ever greater determination to hang onto images not only for narra-

Murray's work shows an ever greater determination to hang onto narrative imagery—if only to create a still more enveloping pictorial universe.

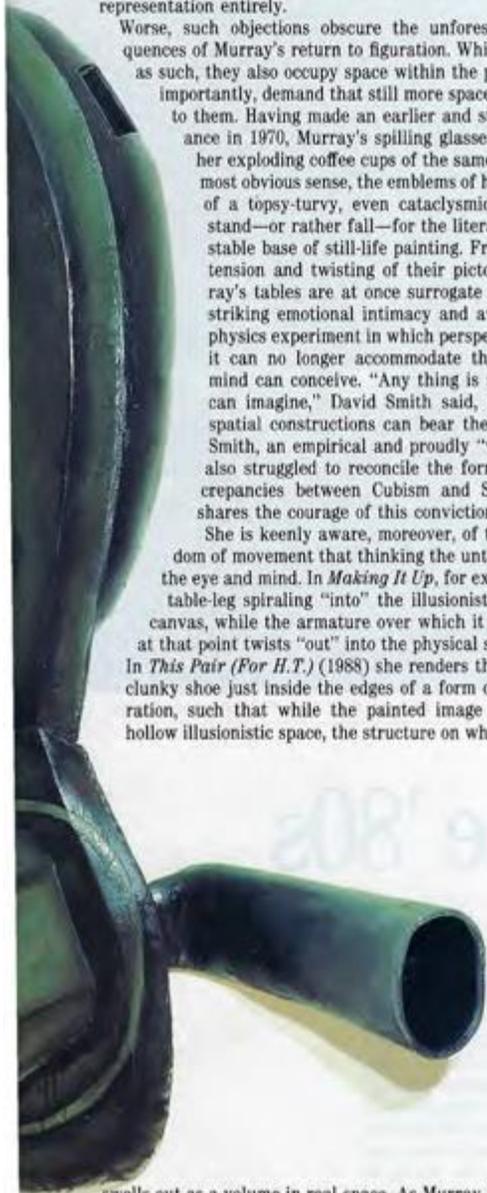
tive or expressive reasons, but also in order to create a totally enveloping pictorial universe, one so completely available to the senses that distinctions of inside and outside, hollow and solid, are all but abolished. In wholly different terms, indeed, Murray has on her own recast the capacious, webbed and infinitely reversible space Picasso arrived at both in his interiors of the war years and particularly, as Leo Steinberg has argued, in his series of variations on Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger*, as well as in his sketches for *L'Avade*.¹¹

Such, of course, has also been the dream of Frank Stella. The pride of formalist critics, historians and curators—Greenberg a notable dissenter—Stella is habitually represented as having eclipsed all others in modernist painting's rush to reconquer illusionistic space. Murray herself has even acknowledged Stella as someone important to her early development. Considering their awkward and unequal relationship in the public mind, and the generally exaggerated competitiveness of the art world at the moment, this willingness to recognize a peer is admirably candid and generous; Stella, certainly, has taken no such risk. Such an acknowledgment—not to mention the engagement it takes note of—is also wise, since any ambitious painter has ample reason to take heed of Stella's struggle and the theoretical gauntlet he has thrown down. "After all, the aim of art is to create space—space that is not compromised by decoration or illustration, a space in which the subjects of painting can live," Stella has said—and he is right.¹²

Nevertheless, Stella has yet to find a concrete pictorial answer to his own demand, and his failure has much to do with the historicism of his arguments and the seductions of programmatic eclecticism. Though he has occasionally introduced isolated topological details in his work—for example, the Lynda Benglis-like corrugated drapes of his 1986 metal reliefs—the structure of his work still derives from the Cubist or Constructivist devices of Fernand Léger, Ivan Puni and Vladimir Tatlin. He works, that is to say, with layered or collaged planar geometries superimposed upon a grid armature. The root-and-branch freshness of Murray's insights not only underscores the cautiousness of Stella's fitful borrowings, but it also explains, by its radical nature, the widespread, if sometimes unconscious, efforts to marginalize her work. To take full cognizance of it would not only overturn an established hierarchy but also require a major revision of the standard account of modernism upon which that hierarchy is founded.

The historicism of this established reading unites in a deeply conservative phallanx formalism's otherwise bickering heirs. In the front ranks are those painters who claim mastery while abandoning any real concern with originality or quality, those critics who define mastery and originality out of existence while heralding painting's death, as if all belonged to some primordial "Golden" age (that age usually defined as the period in which these would-be debunkers first entered the art world), and those younger "endgame" artists who, dotting the "t's and crossing the "l's of their predecessors' accomplishments, flatter themselves with the fantasy of immortality, as, of all things, the editors of modernism.

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Shape Shifter

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Not quite hell-bent on testing her medium's limits, Murray is still exhilaratingly unafraid of really losing control.

Like an interrogative sentence in Spanish, Murray's show both began and ended with the same punctuation mark, but one whose significance vastly exceeded its simple editorial or grammatical function. Looming just beyond the brightly hued paintings of the 1970s that greeted one at the entrance, *Cracked Question* (1987), a mammoth multi-panel, multi-faceted picture that dominated the central room of the Whitney installation, was at once the first image on which one's eyes fell and a tense conclusion to the chronological sequence of intervening works. Given this painting's arced layout and its location at the exhibition's axis, one might accurately say that Murray's retrospective spiraled into the dramatic rhetorical pause announced by this picture. On a scale with the largest Kiefer, and, like his work, brooding and ambiguous, this writhing and disjunctive painting may at first have seemed out of synch with the jazziness of much that preceded it. In fact, it represents among the closest "fits" between shape and symbol, method and metaphor, the artist has yet realized.

Gawky, witty and disturbing, *Cracked Question* is not only quintessential Murray in its energy, moodiness and complex articulation of form, but it also gives a particularly pointed emphasis to the artist's by-now-thematic drama of not knowing. As revved up and ready to go as many of her paintings are, her work is most affirmative when it seems most likely to spin out and crack up from sheer momentum. Murray is not hell-bent in her testing of the medium's limits, but neither is she afraid of losing control. Doubt, instead of unnerving the artist, seems to inspire her with confidence. Clearly, she would rather play hunches and make pictures than follow a hypothesis to pictorial proof.

The trajectory those pictures trace, regrettably abbreviated but nonetheless clearly delineated by this show, reminds one of Ezra Pound's caution to students of literature that "ignorant men of genius are constantly rediscovering 'laws' of art which academics had mislaid or hidden." Neither ignorant nor male, Murray has nevertheless done just that. For her the question is, "What next?" A partial answer can be seen in a new body of work that still further confounds stylistic opposites, emotional dichotomies and esthetic conventions of illusionism and objectivity. Meanwhile, in a period when so many seem content to play the angles, the larger question still persists as to whether the suppleness of Murray's approach and the stubbornness it has required will continue to be treated as an interesting exception or begin to be seen by her peers as an unavoidable challenge. A challenge it most certainly is, however, for, as Murray has shown, the essence of painting is not what it can be reduced to (reproduction, pastiche, gambit or system) but what it can embrace—and what, in order to make room for unruly intuitions and vital paradoxes, it must become. □

1. The original New York venue of this exhibition was to have been the ill-starred Edward R. Broida Museum. Slated for what would have been the museum's inaugural year, this show, like the Cindy Sherman and Eric Fischl exhibitions also scheduled by its director, Joan Simon, came to the Whitney only after Broida inexplicably pulled the plug on his own project.

In any case, the Murray show opened at the Dallas Museum of Art (Mar. 1-Apr. 19, 1987) before going on to the Albert and Vera List Visual Art Center, M.I.T., Cambridge, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (May 8-June 28), the Museum of Contemporary

Art, Los Angeles (July 28-Sept. 29), the Des Moines Art Center (Nov. 10, 1987-Jan. 3, 1988), and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (Jan. 31-Mar. 27). The Whitney Museum was its last stop (Apr. 21-June 26, 1988).

2. As different as these artists are—and one might add Philip Guston to the list but for the fact that he belonged to the first "mainstream" generation of Abstract Expressionism—all share an uncommon capacity to make serious art out of what Hesse, in a letter to Sol LeWitt, once called her "own weird humor."

3. Elizabeth Murray, from an interview with Kate Horsfield for the Video Data Bank, published in *Profile*, Summer 1986, vol. 5, p. 15.

4. Elizabeth Murray, from an unpublished interview with Greg Masters, 1987.

5. Elizabeth Murray, from a caption in the exhibition catalogue.

6. Reference to the Munch painting is made by Murray in a caption from the catalogue.

7. Anti-form and post-Minimal art of the late 1960s and early 1970s also corresponds at times with Murray's work, in tenor, technique or basic structure. Though not mentioned by Murray herself (and in no obvious way an influence upon her), Eva Hesse's early polychrome reliefs, Robert Morris's felt hangings, Richard Serra's rubber-strap pieces, and Richard Tuttle's painted plywood lozenges and unstretched irregular canvas polygons seem apposite here. In strictly mathematical respects, even Ruth Volmer's topological solids are likewise worthy of note, although they are in no sense esthetically related to Murray's work.

8. Linda Dalrymple Henderson has recently explored the question of *n*-dimensional mathematical models in relation to Cubism and related tendencies in *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton University Press, 1983). Long before the congealed spectacle of the Hyperreal caught the imaginations of postmodernists, hyperspace suggested to modernists a world of infinitely manifold dimensions. Few have been extensively considered. Once again it seems as if modernism is not so much dead as spooked and unfinished.

As to the nature of that unfinished business, it is worth noting that at the very beginning of their Cubist researches Braque and Picasso experimented with curved formats, either circumscribing ovals inside rectangular canvases or using oval stretchers, thus exploiting what had traditionally been a portrait shape to finesse the perennially vexing problem of "corners." Mondrian, who later found another solution with his "diamond" paintings, initially followed his predecessors' examples in his abstractions of churches and in the "plus-minus" drawings and paintings made between 1910 and 1917. Nevertheless, the floating grids within these Cubist works never responded fully to the arced geometry of their container, anymore than the rendered cylinders of Léger's paintings or the conical sections in Puni's reliefs affected the squared-off external structure of their works. Meanwhile, Man Ray's photographs of topological models from the Poincaré Institute, while suggestive of new pictorial options, treated their subjects as Surreal "readymades" and boxed them within the right angles of the print paper. Thus, whether viewed through an ordinary window or a rounded porthole, the alternately faceted and planar space of modernism remained conceptually separate from its frame unless both took an essentially planar form. By springing its margins, Ron Gorchov popped the Cubist oval into a tense three-dimensional arena and in so doing became the first contemporary artist to take useful advantage of these neglected precedents.

9. Lately, sculptors John Newman, Steve Keister and, most successfully, Richard Deacon have all experimented with essentially abstract uses of topological shapes.

10. For a layman's explanation of the basic principles of topology see: Keith Devlin, *Mathematics: The New Golden Age*, Penguin Books, 1988; Michael Guillen, *Bridges to Infinity: The Human Side of Mathematics*, Jeremy P. Tarcher, Los Angeles and St. Martin's Press, New York, 1983. Derived from the second of these texts, the inflated and deflated basketball example suggests an interesting perspective on Jeff Koons's equilibrium tanks. When on display that work exploits conventional solid geometries—spheres and cubes—to symbolize a kind of suspended animation—a situation of total insularity, with symmetry and stasis in deathlike perfection. With the air let out for storage, his basketballs—some of which I happened to see this way in a gallery back room—acquire an eccentric particularity and take on an entirely more animated aspect. A similar fate can be imagined for Koons's stainless-steel bunny, his bronze life raft and Aqua-lung, and his overblown cartoon characters and pinups. As even his vacuum cleaners seem to testify, he is clearly preoccupied with pumping things up. Tumescence and permanence are obsessions of his. Certainly, Koons's pneumatic strategy has proven effective both esthetically and commercially—and to him the terms are purposefully interchangeable. Inflation begs for deflation, however. Similarly, Koons's rigid world begs for a topological transformation. He could, of course, keep things cool and pricey even as they become floppy, and so take over Dali's place as well as Warhol's.

11. Leo Steinberg, "The Algerian Women and Picasso at Large," *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972. Regarding Murray's insertion of a reversible Picasoid space into an elastic topological one, paintings such as *Table Turning* (1982-83), *Deeper than D* (1983) and *The Kitchen* (1985) are of special relevance.

12. Frank Stella, *Working Space*, Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 5.

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