

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Donald B. Kuspit, "Elizabeth Murray's Dandyish Abstraction," *Artforum*, February 1978, pp. 28-31

## ARTFORUM



**Donald B. Kuspit**

Jean-Paul Sartre, discussing "one of the most fundamental tendencies of human reality—the tendency to fill," asserts that "a good part of our life is passed in plugging up holes, in filling empty places, in realizing and symbolically establishing a plenitude."<sup>1</sup> Well, in Elizabeth Murray's painting, the plenitude seems to have been there from the start, masked by, yet emanating from, the planes of the picture. The problem is to puncture this plenitude (to break the bubble, so to speak) by making holes in it—symbolic holes which may seem to imply, if not an emptiness, an alternative, less complete, presence than the plenitude itself. One way or another, usually by what have been called "small markings."<sup>2</sup> Murray interrupts the surface in a way that initially seems absurd, but finally makes pictorial and, as we will see, "emotional" sense.

Murray's project of painting, then, seems to involve two "steps": first to establish symbolically a plenitude.

**ELIZABETH MURRAY'S  
DANDYISH  
ABSTRACTION**

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

then to puncture it—not so much to dissipate as to deflate it, implying that however much it is tangibly there, there are still other things that are intangibly “sensible.” The sense of generalized plenitude is established by adumbrating the surface into a matrix of sensations by means of what has been called an “estimacy of gesture,” or, more precisely, with seemingly uniform strokes that in fact “vary according to the size of an area and remain visible according to the way each color does, often a seemingly monochrome area will be an animated flurry of matte and shiny patches.”<sup>3</sup> However refined or unrefined it may be considered, and however much it involves the use of “pale reticent” colors (as in Murray’s early work) or “stronger” ones (more recently), this surface articulates through its “vocabulary of expressionist minutiae” the “animalian energy” of an undifferentiated plenitude.<sup>4</sup> This “skin” is punctured by “figures” which are like “brightly colored scars,” or, as I prefer to think of them, like warpaint applied in a

larly from about 1975, seems a contrived, arch “gaucherie” which amounts to a species of elegance.

If there is any single method characterizing Murray’s development to date, it is—more than the new eccentricity of shape in her recent work—the repression of predictable, known shapes, such as had appeared in *Up Step*, 1973, and *Möbius Band*, 1974. These are replaced by accents, mere suggestions of shape—that is, by Murray’s “little figures”: a reduction of shapes to schemata even greater than that which took place in the history of Cubism. In a sense, the recent eccentrically shaped canvases, with their curious crudity of shape, which might be regarded as forced primitiveness, as in *Desire*, 1976-77, and *Singing School*, 1976—these restore the fully articulated shape now literally lost by the turn to “accents.” In such works as *Evil Spaceship*, 1976, *Searchin*, 1976, and *Anticipation*, 1976-77, where regularity of canvas is the rule, the accents enlarge and become eccentric, as if humorously to insist on irrationality



Elizabeth Murray, Untitled, 1974. Oil on canvas.

tentative, even fugitive, design. The particulars of this abstract design—“little figures that play,” “quirky little arcs and loops, or accent-mark dots and squares”—go against the generalized plenitude established by the “elusive surface incident” with its “urgent . . . energy,” while at the same time mapping it, giving it a center, often an off-center—that is, making it a form, even if an asymmetrical one. We see this in *Flamingo*, 1974, where the figure asymmetrically spans the plenitude; in *Untitled*, 1975, where a wobbly spiral maps the plenitude into a terrain; and in *Beginner*, 1976, where a central, inconclusive loop labors to stabilize a setting that is half morphic, half amorphous. In general, the contrast between a “crawling” surface and the neat if eccentric figures settled, often uncomfortably, on it—and functioning as a kind of quasi-system of coordinates for the surface—shows the typical “play” of “elegance against awkwardness” which has been much noticed in Murray’s work. In fact, any individual work, particu-

whatever the rule and however much that irrationality, that sense of strange, primitive form, must be induced rather than trusted to arise spontaneously.

How can we locate these works in the history of formalism, where they belong? We might begin by accepting Robert Pinus-Witten’s recognition of a “resurgent Romanticism” in much recent abstract art, “linked to the fact that external epistemologies . . . are no longer sufficient” in themselves.<sup>5</sup> There is, of course, the question as to whether they ever were sufficient. But in the context the point is that the “external epistemologies” are insufficient not, as Pinus-Witten thinks, because of their public interpretations as signs of “transcendence—crypto-religious experience impervious of analysis,” or their “sentimentalized and mythologized content,” but because they are no longer expressively or emotionally significant. Admittedly, the effort expressively to redeem such abstractions by regarding them as “images” of transcendence is ill-advised, but the implication that

epistemic abstraction has expressive problems remains correct. The point is that “formalist art values,” whose “central tenet,” as Pinus-Witten says, is “the absolute congruency and inseparability of form and content,” are always in danger of becoming overly dry—sterile. The congruence threatens to become unstrung, to lose its resoluteness, because the tension which makes form and content seem truly inseparable is inherently hard to sustain. This is partly because of the hermeticism of the formalist approach—content is self-referenced (one almost might say self-acting) form—and partly because the catalyst for self-action or self-referentiality is the mundane, uncertain energy (shall we say “temperament?”) of the artist, which is usually forgotten in the equation of congruence, in the self-identity of form established by the inseparability of form and content. The attempt to create the illusion that form is self-acting is compromised the moment one recognizes that the energy with which it acts and the emotion

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Elizabeth Murray, *Spring Plant*, 1977, oil on canvas, 43 x 47 1/2"



Elizabeth Murray, *March Day*, 1975, oil on canvas, 71 x 72"

which this action generates are humanly intended.

Now what Murray does is to restore dialectical tension to the equation of congruence (form = content), by artful, even coy, techniques. These techniques create an artificial ("artful") paradise of expressive escapades, amounting to the creation of a dandish abstraction. The generalized effect of asymmetry, a somewhat forced effect—which some recent criticism treats as spontaneous, if only by not noticing that it is forced—restores those "audacities of eccentricity" which Camus notes were among the hallmarks of dandyism.<sup>8</sup> The point is that where, in 19th-century France, such esthetic audacities signified rebellion—even if only personal and "vain," rather than social rebellion—today they signify domesticity with a tilt, i.e., thoroughly domesticated abstraction trying hard to be lyrical and adventurous. Contrived eccentricity restores provisional audacity—improvised rebellion—to a tamed, even commonplace, visual "purity." Purity made primitive—murky, elusive, "touchingly" expressionistic—or seemingly disrupted by a counter-purity—the accents—makes for an authentic decadence, that is, a new "rare sensation" of formalism instead of the old jaded sense of its inevitability. Murray, as it were, proves Camus' point that "dandyism is a degraded form of asceticism"—she gives us a degraded and thereby enlivened, freshly expressive, formalist purity. This is perhaps most clear in the subtle, almost perverse, historicism of her work, which seems to borrow tidbits and inspirations from a whole range of abstractions. There are Malevichean and Nolandish moments, as well as more generally systemic and Minimalist and, more guardedly, expressionist looks—some obvious, some impacted, all summary. There is above all an over-consciousness of the medium, if that is possible, in the sense that planarity and touch at times seem to matter more than the limits and shape of the individual plane and the kind of touch—just that which gives them their particularity.

Murray, then, in the name of an admirably tense congruence and inseparability of form and content (call this romantic if you wish, but the word is too weak from overuse to carry the weight of the idea) dandifies reduction. She makes it both elusive and eccentric, seemingly unclear in its "formal" direction and seemingly "unruly"—unprincipled, unprogrammed. Perhaps *Beginner*, with its coil or chain in the center and its murky royal purple and chalky gray, all constituted by elusive touch, most clearly shows this artificiality (in the sense of artifice) unprogrammed, dan-

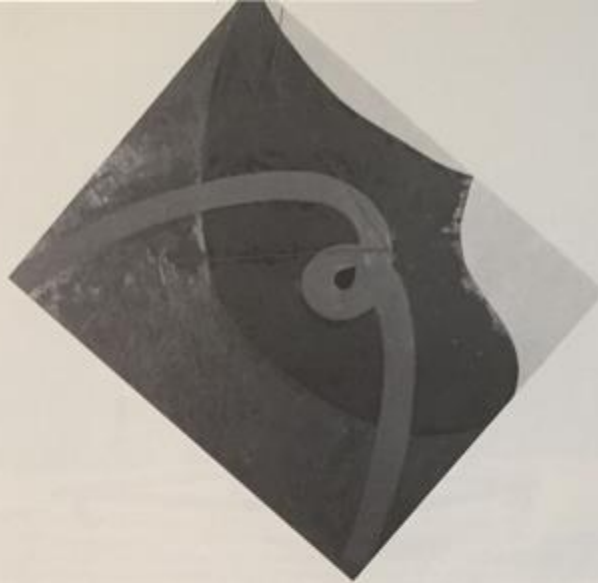
# GLADSTONE GALLERY

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

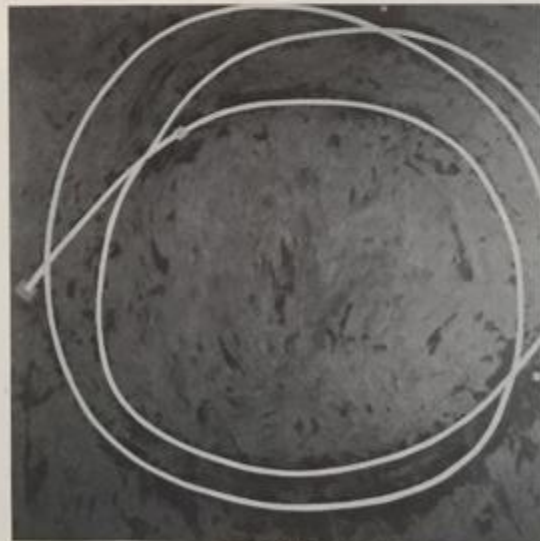
dyish reductionism. For while the coil is a literal center to the canvas it does not "control" the purple and gray planes, which go their own way—especially the purple one, with its eccentric shape. Petrus Borel once remarked, in a statement that has come to be accepted as epitomizing the dandy's position, or is at least taken as "causing" the dandyish acts which are a way out of the impasse it articulates, "I was conscious of my power and I was conscious of my chains." Of course, Robert Morris' 1974 Castell-Sonnabend poster of himself in chains is a direct exemplification of this situation, and the best example of the neo-dandyism which pervades a part of the art world. But Murray, in her own, indirect way relates to the statement. She poetically pictures it (where Morris grandiosely yet prosaically applies it to himself). For she is conscious of the power in her paint—in the painterly (the much noted energy, arbitrarily called "animal" and compared to scratchings, or traces of scratchings)—but chains this power, however loosely and eccentrically, in form. Yet like the loop-coil-chain trinket-ornament in the center of *Beginner*, form never wraps it up. And this new sense of form—even reduction-achieved form—as no longer "wrapping up" the painting, amounts to a dandyish rebellion against it, but also an elegant, equally dandyish, articulation of it.<sup>7</sup> The results are slightly comic, whereas Morris means to be tragic (7), but the main point is that both imply a plenitude of presence—whether of "active" paint or "struggling" persona—which they don't quite know how to deliver, to wrap up. Perhaps they never can do so, because they are, in the last analysis, only interested in giving an already familiar issue—an issue which has become "formal"—a dandyish stance. They give new life to an abstraction that has become a formality—these days a Lazarus that needs regular miracles to sustain it—by treating it informally, with all the self-conscious, stylized abandon of the dandy ■

Donald B. Kuspit is professor of art at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, New York, 1956, p. 613.
2. Carter Russell, "The Paint Thickers," *Artforum*, June 1976, p. 86.
3. Melissa Smith, "Elizabeth Murray at Paula Cooper," *Art in America*, March-April 1977, p. 114.
4. Alan Moore, "Elizabeth Murray, Paula Cooper Gallery," *Artforum*, April 1975, p. 82.
5. Robert Rauschenberg, "The Neutro Papers," *Art Magazine*, October 1977, p. 108.
6. Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, New York, 1955, p. 52.
7. Consider Charles Beauden's remark in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" (1880): "Chance appears above all in periods of transition, when democracy is not yet all-powerful, and aristocracy is only just beginning to fall and fall. In the disorder of these times, certain men who are socially, ethically and financially at an issue, but are rich in native energy, may experience the idea of establishing a new kind of aristocracy."



Elizabeth Murray, *Falling*, 1976, oil on canvas, 118 x 119".



Elizabeth Murray, *Pink Spiral Lines*, 1975, oil on canvas, 76 x 76".