

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Ronny H. Cohen, "Elizabeth Murray's Colored Space," *Artforum*, December 1982, pp. 36

ARTFORUM

ELIZABETH MURRAY IS ONE OF the few authentic pictorial pathfinders working today. Since the mid '70s she has charted a strikingly personal and influential course through the Modernist-sanctioned yet supercharged concept of painting as colored space. Stressing eccentric geometries, deeply saturated hues, and constructively dynamic compositions, her vision has illuminated for many other artists, particularly those of the emerging generation, a way of making abstract paintings that simultaneously probe and reveal the physical and psychical dimensions of "colored space," in a sharply individuated and wondrously articulate expression. Her paintings offer not only plenty to see and think about but much to confront.

Over the years Murray's colored space has grown increasingly specific, seeking to translate its contents into contemporary visual information. Besides teeming with sophisticated art-historical references and perceptual insights concerning the behavior of colors and planes, her art is shaded, most importantly, by its emission of extraperceptual sensations. The work's strong psychological impact, a product of the paintings' startling persuasiveness as images, is due mainly to Murray's authoritative handling of forms and structures. Like all serious Modern art, her paintings speak knowingly and passionately about art and life, but—and this is where she takes and pushes the Modernist tradition forward—these finely tuned messages encapsulate two major conditions of mass-media culture—the rhythm of fast-time specificity and the sensuality of aggressive fragmentation.

Murray's early career coincides with a strangely polemical interlude in American art, when once again in this century painters found themselves in the rather uncomfortable position of having to defend their practice from attacks on its value, legitimacy and relevance by their art-world colleagues. The late '60s and early '70s experienced the crest of yet another "painting is dead" wave, prompted on the one hand by the (momentary) triumph of the Minimal object, and on the other by the reductivist excesses of "Post-Painterly Abstraction," which led—according to the formalist criteria then enjoying dominating critical sway—ineluctably to the last painting. Murray, who had moved to New York in 1967 (after student and graduate stints at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Mills College in California respectively, and some teaching), lived and indeed worked through it all. No doubt she was moved to evaluate and clarify her own ideas about painting by the cavils and controversies concerning her chosen medium, coupled with direct and sustained on-the-spot exposure to what was around (whether Pop—Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, and Roy Lichtenstein; Minimalism—Donald Judd, Carl Andre, and Dan

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Flavin; the response to Minimalism—Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier, and Alan Saret; Post-Painterly Abstraction—Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland, and late Barnett Newman; or the response to Post-Painterly Abstraction—Brice Marden and early Chuck Close).

Between 1967 and 1974, the breakthrough year when Murray arrived at the back-to-basics constructive approach that she continues to investigate, her paintings changed radically. Murray's earlier "funky paintings involved with symbols and metaphors," as the artist herself describes them, gave way to relief paintings made of plaster and wood, and these in turn led, in the early '70s, to oil paintings featuring compositions of repetitive forms like steps and waves which she could reduce to and represent with a line. Then, in 1974, the appearance of such works as *Two or Three Things* and *Flamingo* signaled a profound change—the emergence of Murray's unabashed interest in the visual politics of "colored space." In these and other paintings of that year, the content as well as the intention seems to be the simultaneous placement and activation of color, the aim being to give this element, in essence, a space/place of its own.

Both *Two or Three Things* and *Flamingo* are almost square canvases, measuring 68 by 66 inches and 90 1/2 by 87 1/2 inches respectively. Each is constructed along a diagonal dividing two colored planes; the planes consist of yellow and green, in *Two or Three Things*, and pink and blue, in *Flamingo*. The juxtaposition of the planes causes the colors to vibrate off each other and to appear to shift backward and forward. At first glance these paintings have the reductive look of mainstream abstract art in their apparent emphasis on such formal issues as color, scale, image, edge, and object. But added geometrical motifs, which look hand-drawn and willful—small, imperfectly shaped squares and a curved segment in *Two or Three Things*, and an additional, looped, diagonal in *Flamingo*—bring to mind the artist's hand, and thereby the personal touch that is noticeably absent in much abstract painting (particularly that of the Post-Painterly Abstract variety, which valued the notion of "autonomy"). Abstract Expressionism, of course, is a given general source for Murray's stress on color, but other "lines"—the early 20th-century pioneers of "colored space," namely Piet Mondrian and Kasimir Malevich—are evoked by the dynamic surface tensions involving colored planes and geometrical configurations. Mondrian's rhythmical use of colored rectangles is recalled in the placement of the geometrical motifs in *Two or Three Things*, and the flying and specifically directed forms of Suprematism are recalled by the speedy character of the looping line in *Flamingo*.

What the consideration of these paintings in the context of early-20th-century abstraction points to is the significance of movement to the creation of "colored space." In Mondrian's case this movement is of a tension-filled but harmonious kind; with Malevich it is born from carefully choreographed conflicts and disharmonies among colored forms. No one rule applies to the body of Murray's

GLADSTONE GALLERY

paintings, where the depth, degree, and direction of movement is highly individualized and varies according to the needs of each picture. In both *Two or Three Things* and *Flamingo* the shifting displacements of the colored planes are the source of the motion, whose speed and impact are materialized by the weight of thick and textured surfaces. The effect is pleasing disharmony. A quality present throughout the paintings, this materialized movement creates concrete worlds of colored space, with luminous surfaces that through the years have remained painterly in the Cézannesque tradition of a rich and varied “love of oil” palette.

It is fitting that the excitement Murray experienced years ago upon viewing a Cézanne still life at the Art Institute of Chicago prompted her to become an artist. Cézanne’s dictum, “When color is at its richest, form is at its fullest,” expressed in his famous letters to Emile Bernard, is an accurate description of the face-off between color per se and form per se found in Murray’s paintings. In *Moody Ball*, 1975–78, a round shape reminiscent of the simultaneously flat but sculptural forms of Cézanne’s apples dominates the surface. Colored bluish-black, it looms forward from a bright green background which it completely fills except for the corners of the canvas. A narrow and tapering orange-red wedge slashes its top, as a knife would a piece of fruit. Viewing the composition is a strangely affective experience of swaying, roundabout sensations caused by the overpowering presence of the bluish-black shape barely held by the edges.

In *Anticipation*, 1976, the diamond-shaped royal blue surface exists in dynamic relationship with the geometric motifs. A partially diagonal, effectively horizontal turquoise bar slices two overlapping circles, one pink and the other bluish-black, while a red dot floats above. In this painting and others such as *Rolling Ball*, 1975–76, the color starts to shoot across and bounce off the surface, emerging as real shape, not dependent on outlines.

Murray’s forceful exploration of the character of this materialized movement extends the mainstream Modernist history of such investigations with work that is so synthesized that it includes information learned from a wide range of that history’s radical inventions. For example, the superimpositions and stackings in Malevich’s Suprematist compositions —devices that both constructed and controlled the “flight” of colored planes—are pushed forward, as are the devices that scale up the thrusting and vibratory impact of the color, bringing to mind Matisse’s ability to animate the abstract sensibility by encouraging the reading of certain forms and surfaces as figures and grounds. In such examples as *Rolling Ball; Beginner*, 1976; *Spring Point* and *New York Dawn*, both 1977; *Parting and Together*, 1978; *Heart and Mind*, 1981; and *Long Arm*, 1982, the major notions, sensations, and expectations traditionally associated with the figure and ground relationship, involving polar concepts of positive/negative space, active/neutral surface, and solid/void, are questioned by the expressive animation of the whole composition as well as of each of the parts. Matisse, in his paper cutouts, took a similarly encyclopedic approach to the various problems associated with figure and ground,

GLADSTONE GALLERY

but Murray has gone beyond—to the breaking point, literally, in the multiple-piece format paintings that appeared in 1981, such as *Art Part*, which actually risks breaking, and entering, the integrity of the composition.

Before that radical point could be reached, Murray activated the ground by forcing the viewer to identify it more and more closely with the support. In *Singing School*, 1976, for example, the shaped canvas is a quadrilateral which contains a textured blue ground and two “figures”—a cross made up of three interlocking lines and what looks like a collapsed square in, or as, the upper left-hand corner. Though small and far apart from each other, these figures are potent, loaded shapes which force the ground to react, to become in essence a lively and assertive presence in order to keep its place. In *Parting and Together*, 1978, which is shaped like a rhomboid on its side, the color space is animated as a consequence of the “who’s on top” competition between the figure(s) and the ground(s). Ambiguities abound here concerning the identity of a black, flamboyantly curved form, diagonally angled across the center like an abstracted tipped nude: is it figure or ground for the adjacent pink silhouette which echoes and surrounds its shape, or for the lightning-blue line that dashes across its own surface? The cutout effect of the jagged green areas—which are in turn intercut with purplish wedges—surrounding the pink form compound the question. Several of the wedges touch the black and pink forms and encourage readings of them simultaneously as color/form, figure/ground. Two red dots located in opposite corners from each other syncopate the planar and linear rhythms. The result, as the title indicates, is fragmented and agitated colored space where color and form, figure and ground, exist in active, almost argumentative relationships. The variety of configurations in this picture offers wry comment on one of the major rules of early Modernist abstract painting as promulgated by Wassily Kandinsky—the suitability of certain forms for certain colors. According to Kandinsky, sharp colors require sharp forms and soft, deep colors need round forms. In *Parting and Together* the use of secondary colors like pink and purple, and their presentation in a bold, larger-than-life format—the total measurements are 122 by 52 inches—enhance the gestural and biomorphic qualities of the imagery and open the picture up to associative, empathic responses, bringing to mind connections and separations among people.

Murray’s treatment of the figure and ground is uniquely open-ended in that it deliberately confronts the traditional antagonism between abstraction and representation, leaving the interpretation up to the viewer. In *Tempest*, 1979, a six-pointed canvas which seems barely able to contain its lively composition of animated, swelling forms, the support is immediately identified with the ground. A similarly tense state of affairs exists in the rectangular *Night Reach*, 1979, a painting showing a materialized movement which swirls beyond the dimensions of the canvas. *Breaking*, 1980, a diptych consisting of two large, seven-point, zigzag canvases, offers a visual apocalypse apt for the ’80s. Each canvas is covered with a veritable inventory of dynamic configurations, from lightning bolts to serrations and

GLADSTONE GALLERY

segments of different sizes and colors. The canvases reach out to each other and boldly interact with the viewer. The rhythmical interchanges of planar and linear impulses rushing from one piece to another energize the colored space into colored force. The forms and the supports impress as figures while the wall upon which they hang is, in the end, the only ground. Far from being negative, however, the wall has been galvanized into a positively charged surface by the materialized movements directing the colored space. The latter takes on an even more explosive dimension in the 22-piece *Art Part*, 1981. In this work the fragmentation drives the play between abstraction and representation to new Rorschach heights. The divisive structure may bring to mind the Futurist program of breaking up things and scenes according to “lines of force,” while the surging quality of the overall imagery may recall the throbbing compositions of Kandinsky in his major works of 1913 such as *Composition VIII*. But Murray’s *FFO* (fragmented flying object) has a thoroughly contemporary impact, reflecting the electronic information revolution.

The elements of content and emotion implied in the earlier work are liberated and opened up by the forceful expression characteristic in Murray’s recent work, which is, interestingly, more “figurative” than the earlier work. In *Wake Up*, 1981, a three-piece painting, irony and feelings of start-and-stop, of the early-morning get-up-and-go that got up and went, are evoked. Rendered in an expansively Pop, cartoonish style, a cup can be read as suspended among the three shapes in a constant state of spilling and breaking before the viewer’s eyes. In *Long Arm*, 1982, another multiple-piece canvas, the materialized movement is embodied in a composition best described as a figure/image within a figure/object. Figure, in the case of this painting, has a directly human presence—of an energetic, jaunty figure, in fact, executing a step-kick.

Murray’s work is convincing because it is absolutely authentic. Never didactic, every one of her paintings impresses as highly individuated, honest expression. At this time, when art history is up for grabs and artists rifle the past with calculated, gimmick-ridden, look-at-me strategies in mind, Murray has shown how to use, not abuse, Modern art. In her work, any recognition of historical sources is pleasurable and does not dominate the viewing experience, or cancel her daring search for new abstract forms and structures that say what she wants to say. Hers is very American work. What finally the career of New York painter Elizabeth Murray demonstrates is that contrary to the return of unabashed misogyny to certain quarters of the contemporary art scene (and of course to the culture at large) women too can make big and tough paintings that count.

Ronny H. Cohen is an art historian, critic and independent curator.