

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Carroll Dunham, "Shape of Things to Come: The Art of Elizabeth Murray," *Artforum*, November 2005, pp. 208-213

## ARTFORUM

**PAINTING IN NEW YORK** during the second half of the 1970s was a mess. The self-analytical, radically empty work of artists like Jo Baer, Robert Ryman, Brice Marden, and Robert Mangold, which had been the main chance in the not-yet-fully-played-out arc of modernist painting, was proving generative primarily for those artists and a tight phalanx of sympathetic curators and critics, while its implications of closure made its absorption by a generation of enraptured younger artists quite problematic. The art schools and galleries were loaded with mannered attempts to thread some needle of original nuance among the dead ends implied by the older artists' positions, while the broader painterly discourse became increasingly cacophonous. Photorealism and the remnants of "lyrical abstraction" waned as Pattern and Decoration, New Image, and "bad" painting waxed in a Darwinian struggle for philosophical market share. Less categorizable investigations into the implications of painting at the nexus of Conceptual art and traditional materiality were being pursued along both abstract and representational lines, and an approach to abstraction was beginning to crystallize, typified by artists like Bill Jensen, Gary Stephan, and Stephen Mueller, that seemed to be asking what nonobjective painting might be if Clement Greenberg's rigorous proscriptions had never hijacked the conversation in American aesthetics. The juggernaut of modernism had already broken down and was being stripped for parts, although it would be a few years until the big bang of the early '80s, when these disparate pathways would assume coherence as precursors to the sensibility of a new wave of younger artists.

It was within this bubbling cauldron of quantum potentiality that Elizabeth Murray began to exhibit her work. Murray's paintings were fresh and bold. Works like *New York Dawn*, 1977, and *Children Meeting*, 1978, with their evocative shapes, lightninglike bands, tilting tectonic planes, and humming dots all colliding and overlapping within surfaces of lush oil paint, felt at the time like harbingers of a

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

rambunctious new abstraction. Possessed of a bouncy, indeterminate emotional content and nodding toward cartooning while not wishing away the physical and formal self-awareness of recent post-Minimalist abstraction, they rehabilitated discarded structures from earlier modern painting: The biomorphic silhouettes of Arp, the pulsating Platonism of the later Kandinsky, and the spatial fractures of Stuart Davis's colonial Cubism were all hovering just offstage, present if not fully accounted for.

This reading was fine as far as it went, but without access to the backstory, one couldn't realize how much Murray had unlearned, or deferred, in order to reach this point. A decade later, the catalogue of her first museum survey, co-organized in 1987 by the Dallas Museum of Art and the MIT List Visual Arts Center, revealed early paintings that showed her struggles with both Cubism and the aesthetic of Chicago Imagism. The problematics of the former, although credited in the creation myth of mainline Euro-American abstraction, were considered totally regressive by the '70s, and the concerns of the latter (the arrival at the Whitney of Jim Nutt's 1974 traveling survey notwithstanding) were basically off the grid of New York consciousness. But Murray, while roughly the peer of Marden and Mangold, was also the contemporary of Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, and Roger Brown, and had studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago when the key artists of the Hairy Who were either fellow students or teachers. This latent influence, along with her interest in the origins, loose ends, and disconnects of formalist thinking, began to combine by the late '70s, and would soon merge and detonate into an expanding universe of unnerving pictorial propositions.

There were certainly premonitions that Murray's notion of the bracketed situation we call "a painting" was, at the very least, unconventional. *Searchin'*, 1976–77, is one of several works of that time that were painted on flat rectangular canvases but hung diagonally, and by 1978, with works like *With and Tug*, she was painting on eccentrically shaped canvases, asymmetrical starlike polyhedrons whose own dynamism utterly changed the spatial force field within which her forms were deployed.

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

“Shape” as an issue for painting was the demon spawn of the critical program initiated by Greenberg and elaborated by Michael Fried. Most notoriously, Frank Stella’s manipulation of the shape of the physical support in his work of the ’60s was seen as an inevitable evolutionary step in the reduction of painting to its own medium-specific essence, and perhaps also as a way out of the cul-de-sac of graphic decorativism. In Stella’s case this reasoning eventually resulted in weird objects that were difficult to accept as either radical or profound, but younger artists of a non-Greenbergian bent surprisingly found rich potential in this train of thought. In the late ’60s Mangold, Murray’s contemporary in age but forerunner on the curve of artistic self-realization, began exploring the reciprocity, implied by Stella’s earlier forays, between a shaped support and the marks on its surface. Throughout the ’70s and beyond, Mel Bochner, Dorothea Rockburne, and Richard Tuttle worked with shape in their pictorial investigations of thought’s relationship to material, and Ron Gorchov made truculent and repetitive canvases with round corners and a surface curved in two directions like a saddle. Always present in the minds of Murray’s generation of painters was the example of Ralph Humphrey, a currently underestimated figure who began a series of ethereal surfboard-shaped paintings in 1970 and who continued to develop his extremely specific supporting structures until his death twenty years later.

Murray’s involvement with this issue had a different flavor. She was more irreverent toward (or possibly just unconcerned with) reductive formal thinking and apparently ecstatic at the pictorial possibilities opened up by a relaxation of the rectangle’s grip. But it was her constitutional inability to avoid subject matter that catalyzed both the exponentially increasing eccentricity of her work’s physicality and the elaboration of a complex and subtle psychonarrative that characterized her unique development. There were other painters applying formalist attitudes to the problem of subject matter, notably Jennifer Bartlett, Robert Moskowitz, Susan Rothenberg, and Joe Zucker, but Murray’s choices seemed driven by a need to resolve her earlier influences and conflicts. Throughout the early ’80s, Cubist still-life concerns reappeared in paintings depicting coffee cups, shoes, and fragments of domestic interiors, while her Chicago connection insinuated itself in images of wispy, ghostly hands, wraithlike figures, and schematized

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

animalistic biomorphs. Nearly ten feet tall, *Painters' Progress*, 1981, is an apparently haphazard arrangement of shardlike canvases, loosely connected and only intermittently tangent, which carry the image of a cosmically glowing palette and paintbrushes. Not only did a painting like this disrupt the essentially formalist reading that Murray's work had previously seemed to encourage but it had the even more unsettling effect of retroactively invalidating that comforting paradigm. It was like a gauntlet dropped in the face of the depleted justifications circling around much contemporary painting—not shocking in the sense of earlier avant-gardism, but on a more direct level. By bringing the most sophisticated painterly strategies to bear in the representation of such a hokey icon, Murray neutralized volumes of self-perpetuating theoretical cant.

A work like *Yikes*, 1982, embodies other transformative forces Murray was unleashing at the time. An example of her ongoing involvement with representations of cups, it is both a “picture” of that subject and a monumental (and monumentally disturbing) indication of what a painting can be. The drastic increase in the size of the subject (the painting is over nine feet square) creates a honey-I-shrunk-the-beholder compression. One senses powerful and subversive forces operating within the matrix of the everyday. The depiction of steam rising out of the cup as a branching, gray, cactuslike structure exists at a crossroads of cozy breakfast-table domesticity and ruthless formal transmogrification. This nonnarrative drama spans two canvases of indescribable shape, whose hopelessly mismatched interior edges, all zigzags and points, leave an abyss of wall between them as though the painting had been struck by lightning.

Murray began in this period to clarify the facture and palette that has characterized her paintings ever since: primarily flat tones and a rich, oily surface atmosphere, with open-ended and scruffy edge conditions and the occasional use of rather flat-footed shading. While the palette of *Yikes* clearly refers to the browns and grays of Analytic Cubism and is thus somewhat anomalous within Murray's normally bright, disharmonic chromatic world, it does underscore the turn in her work of this time away from any hint of frivolity as she began to realize the depth of the vein she had struck. There really isn't a signature Murray

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

palette; one feels that any and all color is meaningful to her, and her highly intuitive combinations strike a wide range of chords. The central characteristic is a certain vivid cleanness. Her use of color has tended to be sexy and aggressive, bespeaking a healthy appetite for the primaries and a substantial need for variety. The powerful mechanics of desire underlie all these choices, with little concern for the consensual demands of representation.

Throughout the '80s the construction of Murray's paintings became both visually and physically more elaborate, as weirdly shaped canvases collided and, increasingly, overlapped in seemingly provisional arrays that are lent stability only by the unifying field of the painted image. The membrane separating depicted form and actual construction became porous. In *Can You Hear Me?*, 1984, for example, a little Munch-like head is pinioned at the center of a centrifugal vortex of forces both built and painted and emits a scream in the form of a physically constructed cartoon speech-bubble.

As her gargantuan household objects began to require more complex topological surfaces, Murray began paying less heed to the planar integrity of the support and needed to reimagine the entire technology of stretchers and canvas. The stretched canvas is the generic signifier for "painting" within our tradition, and it was crucial for Murray to maintain the constants of that language as her imagination went wild with variables. Multiple stretchers, carpentered and carved elements, and levels of relief that challenged assumptions about a painting's depth of field all went into these contorted supports and their canvas skins. The result was a kind of trippy distortion, like having an odd new thought about something you've seen innumerable times before. These inventions were generated from little clay models and drawings, which already described the major elements of the proposed work, but Murray approached the making of the paintings themselves like perfectly normal canvases, with an open and improvisatory stance. One feels before her work that it is both stable and provisional, as though the paintings were composed of some exotic plasma that could still resume its morphic flow. In fact, one can imagine any number of different turns her work might have taken away from the categorical conditions that both restrain it and give it its quirky freedom. But the amazing thing is

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

that her paintings remain paintings, resolutely holding onto their status as speculations about the limits of their own medium.

The complex cross-fertilization of various representational conventions continued. In *Dis Pair*, 1989–90, the play among painted image, constructed support, and elusive, convoluted planarity reached a point of freaky gigantism in a depiction of architectonic oxfords. There is complete interchangeability of mimetic devices: painted and constructed shoelaces and holes, actual and illusionistic perspectival conditions, and edges both drawn and physical. *Tangled*, also of 1989–90, hangs like a kind of squashed bladder or deformed shell whose wooden lips encircle real orifices swallowing and regurgitating ropey lines, some modeled of wood and others painted. At its center, a rectilinear hole is part picture frame, part sphincter. And in *Button Painting*, 1996, the eponymous subjects are actually built and painted as coextensive representations in a highly personal gloss on Jasper Johns's *Flag* paintings of forty years earlier.

Periodically Murray has doubled back and made flat rectangular paintings, like a detective returning to the crime scene. Squareish and conventionally flat, *Sleep*, 1983–84, and the more recent *Bounding Dog*, 1993–94, would seem to be intense but tradition-bound abstractions if they weren't embedded in the artist's broader investigations, and they owe their taut presence and compositional snap to the understanding of edge conditions and the physicality of color derived from her research in the higher dimensions. Oddly, they are both pictures of dogs.

In Murray's most recent paintings there's been a return to flatness that brings to mind the definition of war as diplomacy pursued by other means. Carnavalesque archipelagos of irregular flat canvases huddle together in approximations of rectangles, their painted images both honoring and ignoring the network of twisted interior boundaries. The simultaneously continuous and discontinuous pictorial skin of *Painters' Progress* has reappeared, recharged with the aggression developed in the intervening years. *Do the Dance*, 2005, appears to be a bird's-eye view of the emotional earthquake surrounding a hapless denizen of a squirmy Technicolor toy town. Swollen highways, barred lines, which could be railroad tracks or spinal cords, electric rivulets of choppy

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

water, bumpy chains of attenuated foliage, and humanoids both rubbery and robotic all collect ominously around a little peanut-shaped head that bleakly shouts . . . yellow. This huge quivering machine is both the next logical step along Murray's singular path and an unholy union of the previously irreconcilable traditions of New York and Chicago. It is a harrowing broadside on both contemporary painting and contemporary life.

In the early '80s, a consensus started to form that Murray was a significant figure who fell generationally somewhere between the artists who had emerged around 1970 and a group of younger American and newly relevant European painters. In 1984 she was included in the Whitney's "Five Painters in New York." No ism was proposed and none was apparent, but it did show painting alive and reasonably well. In a line-up also including Brad Davis, Bill Jensen, Gary Stephan, and John Torreano, Murray seemed the least at ease and the most receptive to the signals of tumultuous ambition emanating from the zeitgeist. She is nothing if not ambitious in the best sense of the word, and the breaking tsunami of '80s painting must have been an invigorating wake-up call. Although the bombast and historicist pretensions of much of the new work was anathema to her sensibility, size did begin to matter more to her. Julian Schnabel's work would have been a particularly pointed goad, condensing as it did ham-fisted representational painting and barge-size, junk-encrusted supports.

The traveling survey of Murray's paintings and drawings that arrived at the Whitney in 1988 made clear that vectors of connection branched from her work to that of her peers and predecessors as well as to artists who had arrived more recently on the scene. Indeed, an odd combination of wide-band connectedness and almost hermetic individualism has characterized Murray's position throughout her career and has only become more poignantly obvious as subsequent waves of younger and younger painters repeatedly reenact the "salvation" of painting through reiterations of postmodern impurity and regressive attachments to outmoded conceptions of narrative, beauty, and skill. Murray's work points to a completely different way past the modernist dilemma, a forward exit strategy aimed straight at the heart of the paradox of obsolescence. It posits another type of impurity by

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

reimagining every element. Within her work, a new kind of space has evolved that is almost Paleolithic in its magical immediacy while suggesting a true futurism whose nascent implications have yet to be explored. If, to cannibalize George W. S. Trow's observation about television, the question is not *what* is painting but where is painting, then Murray's is located in a still-uncharted dimension extending indefinitely right under our collective noses.

The near-term downside of this singularity is a difficulty in assessing Murray's true influence. She is clearly a major figure in the continuing colonization of serious painting by the drawing attitudes of cartooning and animation, which, while latent in earlier modernism, broke into the open with late Philip Guston, Peter Saul, Murray, and many younger artists. But this angle of scrutiny addresses only the top layer of her achievement and ignores the complexity of her unique structural syntax. One does catch fleeting glimpses of connection on that deeper level in, for example, the shaped canvases of Alexander Ross's recent bioterrorist abstractions or in Fabian Marcaccio's hybrid pictorial tumors, but these associations may be unconscious and perhaps even unwelcome. There does not yet appear to be a widespread processing of her ideas. But, as the burst of painting during the '80s clearly demonstrated, it can take several generations for innovations to reappear in surprising, even opportunistic, ways (and "generations" in today's art world are of increasingly brief duration). Murray's exhibition at MoMA should resonate deeply with the legions of artists-in-information who are positioned to grasp her relevance for our elusive cusp of a moment, sifting out what of the twentieth century is useful in the twenty-first.

Tempting as it is, it would be disingenuous to discuss Murray's work at length and not examine the significance of gender (hers, that is). Although the story of postwar American painting is well populated with significant women, some of whom have been mentioned in this essay and many others of whom are now taking their place in this unfolding tale, they are obviously outnumbered by men, and an occasion as visible as this retrospective is certainly noteworthy for its "political" significance. But there is really nothing overtly feminist about Murray's paintings, other than their very existence. The often-invoked theme of

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

“domesticity” coexists with her formal explorations, and it recedes when we remember, as Francine Prose beautifully remarked about Murray’s work, “the (one would think) self-evident fact that the domestic is the world.” By locating her subjects firmly within the zone of hearth, home, and studio, Murray has maintained a steady pressure on her audience to acknowledge the quotidian realities that circumscribe any life and are only rarely foregrounded in painting at her level. And besides, none of the male artists mentioned here (with the possible exception of Saul, who almost insists on it) has ever had his work analyzed, at least in print, as a function of being a white man of a certain age, and until such a discourse becomes comfortable we will remain stuck in our cultural adolescence.

Having said all that, it is nevertheless fascinating to ponder the ubiquity, to the point of invisibility, of the flat rectangular surface as the platform for painting during our historical epoch, and to collate this with the near-total dominion of men in this tradition. Seen in this light the new space of Murray’s work could represent a “feminization” of painting’s limit conditions—a glimpse behind the veil of space-time, where linear experience and stable objecthood become pliable, provisional, and dreamlike. One can imagine the proverbial, archetypal male painter seeing only a confusing, chaotic, and threatening clutter where Murray would find a beckoning, shape-shifting opportunity. Now some of these peculiar and powerful objects will temporarily reside in the high temple of modernism, where they will broadcast their libidinous energy toward the icons of the faith whose edges Murray has so relentlessly probed, and our reading of the sacred texts will be altered by the event.

—*Carroll Dunham is a New York-based artist.*