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Roberta Smith, "Elizabeth Murray, 66, Artist of Vivid Forms, Dies," *The New York Times*, August 13, 2007

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Elizabeth Murray, 66, Artist of Vivid Forms, Dies

By Roberta Smith

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Elizabeth Murray, a New York painter who reshaped Modernist abstraction into a high-spirited, cartoon-based, language of form whose subjects included domestic life, relationships and the nature of painting itself, died yesterday at her home in upstate New York.

She was 66 and lived in TriBeCa and in Washington County, N.Y.

The cause was complications of lung cancer, said Douglas Baxter, president of PaceWildenstein, which has represented her work since 1995.

An intense, unpretentious woman with vivid blue eyes and an unruly nest of prematurely white hair, Ms. Murray received a full-dress retrospective spanning her 40-year career at the Museum of Modern Art in 2006, one of handful of women to be so honored. In 1999 she was the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant.

Ms. Murray belonged to a sprawling generation of Post-Minimal artists who spent the 1970s reversing the reductivist tendencies of Minimalism and reinvigorating art with a sense of narrative, process and personal identity. Her art never fit easily into the available Post-Minimal subcategories like Conceptual, Process or performance art. This may have been because her loyalty to painting, which was out of fashion, was unwavering. At the same time, her blithe indifference to the distinctions between abstraction and representation or high and low could put off serious painting buffs.

Both tendencies enabled her to be one of a small group of painters □ including Philip Guston, Frank Stella and Brice Marden □ who during the 1970s rebuilt the medium from scratch, recomplicating and expanding its parameters and proving that it was still ripe for innovation, in part because of its rich history. Her sources ranged from Cézanne, Picasso, Gris and Miró to Stuart Davis, Al Held and Agnes Martin. As she remarked in the 1987 catalog to her first big museum show, which traveled to the Whitney in 1988: "Everything has been done a million times. Sometimes you use it and it's yours; another time you do it and it's still theirs."

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Elizabeth Murray in 1998 with one of her New York subway murals, at the 59th Street and Lexington Avenue station in Manhattan. G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times

In Ms. Murray's mature work, eccentrically shaped or multipanel canvases fused Cubism's shattered forms and Surrealism's suggestive biomorphism with the scale and some of the angst of Abstract Expressionism and more than a touch of Disneyesque humor and motion. Her semi-abstract shapes resolved into bouncing coffee cups, flying tables or Gumby-like silhouettes with attenuated arms and legs that careered across surfaces like thin, unfurling ribbons. Her preferred spatial effect often seemed to be a swirling vortex, with the illusion of motion both countered and underscored by weighty colors and thick surfaces subdued with the active workings of a palette knife. The overall impression was of some inchoate yet invigorating crisis of the heart or hearth, as intimated by titles like "More Than You Know," "Quake Shoe" and "What Is Love?"

Born in Chicago in 1940, Ms. Murray had a hardscrabble childhood that included bouts of homelessness caused in part by the ill health of her father. Ms. Murray traced her interest in art to watching a nursery-school teacher cover a sheet of paper with thick red crayon, an experience that she said gave her an indelible sense of the physicality of color. She drew constantly from an early age, inspired mostly by newspaper comic strips, and once sent a sketchbook to Walt Disney asking for a job as his secretary. By the fifth grade she was selling erotic drawings to classmates for a quarter.

In 1958, she entered the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her goal, to become a commercial artist, was derailed by a Cézanne still life she passed regularly on the way to classes. She later said that the painting was "the first in which I lost myself looking," and added, "I just realized I could be a painter if I wanted to try."

She graduated from the school in 1962 and earned an M.F.A. from Mills College in Oakland, Calif., in 1964. There she met the painter Jennifer Bartlett, who remained a lifelong friend, and married Don Sunseri, a classmate from the Art Institute.

The paintings she made in California and during her first teaching job, in Buffalo, teemed with ambition, confusion and a penchant for a jokey figuration that qualified as "regional," a popular pejorative at the time. But these works rehearsed all the aspects of her later art: eccentric dimensionality, large scale, crusty paint surfaces and suggestive, emotionally charged, implicitly autobiographical narratives conveyed by extravagant distortions of form.

In the fall of 1967, Ms. Murray moved to New York, where exposure to the work of Mr. Marden and Richard Serra, and to that of lesser-known artists like Ellen Phelan, roiled

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her ambition. She came to know other artists who, like her friend Ms. Bartlett, were combining abstraction and imagery. They included Robert Moskowitz, Susan Rothenberg and Joel Shapiro.



“The Lowdown,” a canvas from 2001.
PaceWildenstein

The birth of her son, Dakota, in 1969, also firmed her ambitions. She proceeded to dismantle and rebuild her art, replacing acrylic paint with oil paint □ which she called “another kind of life form” □ and working on small, rectangular canvases. In the majority, shaky black lines forming grids, ladders and fan shapes are embedded in tactile monochrome fields. By 1973, the year she and Mr. Sunseri divorced, the lines had turned into wavy curves and then mobius bands. She began exhibiting at the Paula Cooper Gallery in SoHo in 1973 and had her first solo show there in 1976.

By 1978, with “Children Meeting,” now in the collection of the Whitney, big biomorphic splats of color jazzed by zigzag lines jostled one another. With “Painter’s Progress” in 1981, she reintroduced legible imagery in the form of a large pink palette shape and three orange brushes inspired by a neon sign in the window of an art supply store. Thereafter, Ms. Murray proceeded with a momentum that rarely weakened. In addition to paintings, she made drawings in all sizes and many mediums, as well as prints and illustrated books. In the early 1980s, she watched in dismay as the revival of painting that she had helped foment was taken over by young male Neo-Expressionists like Julian Schnabel, David Salle and Anselm Kiefer. But she also acknowledged that she benefited from the expansiveness of their work, even if she didn’t always like it.

In many ways the term Neo-Expressionist fit her well as an artist who long maintained that “the subconscious is what you paint about.” Moving between fractured and whole, flat and protruding canvases, and color schemes that could be murky or electric, her paintings asserted themselves as an aggressive mixture of shape, color and surface. Her progress coincided with her happy second marriage, to the poet Bob Holman, and the birth of two daughters in the early 1980s.

In addition to Mr. Holman, who is the founder of the Bowery Poetry Club, Ms. Murray is survived by their daughters, Sophia Murray Holman and Daisy Murray Holman; her son, Dakota Sunseri of Los Angeles; a sister, Susan Murray Resnick of Taos, N.M.; a brother, Thomas Murray, of St. Marys, Ga.; and two grandchildren.

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In the late-1980 and 1990s, Ms. Murray produced several large gritty canvases that appeared to have interiors, their bulging forms suggesting flattened vessels descended from her signature images of cups and goblets. Also around this time she designed two large mosaic murals for the New York City subway system: one is at the 59th Street and Lexington Avenue station in Manhattan and the other at the 23rd Street-Ely Avenue Station in Queens.

Yet around 2000 she embarked on an entirely new phase in works that marshaled together numerous small, irregular but flat-shaped canvases into lighter works that for the first time incorporated liberal amounts of white.

Ms. Murray grew testy when her coffee cups were described as teacups, which she considered dainty. As she remarked to the critic Elizabeth Hess in 1988, "Cézanne painted cups and saucers and apples, and no one assumed he spent a lot of time in the kitchen."