

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Amy Sillman and Robert Storr, "Elizabeth Murray," *Artforum*, November 2007, pp. 71-76

## ARTFORUM

SOME YEARS BACK, a student who had attended the summer program at Skowhegan in Maine told me about the powerful impression Elizabeth Murray had made on him. One thing he recounted stuck in my mind—that during a studio visit, Murray had said in passing, “For you to be right about what you’re doing, not everybody else has to be wrong.” Or is my memory playing tricks on me? Was it actually a woman who recalled this story for me? The matter of gender is significant when you talk about Murray, who died in August at age sixty-six. She was among a handful of woman painters of her generation—roughly that which emerged in the 1970s—who cracked the glass ceiling of the art hierarchy. And while cracking and shattering were not, and are still not, the same thing, Murray shared this hard-earned distinction with Jennifer Bartlett, Joan Brown, Vija Celmins, Mary Heilmann, Lois Lane, Ellen Phelan, Howardena Pindell, Katherine Porter, Liliana Porter, Christina Ramberg, Barbara Rossi, Susan Rothenberg, Jenny Snyder, Joan Snyder, Pat Steir, and many others. (If I have mentioned a few Midwest and West Coast artists here, it is not only to remind New York-centric readers of their existence but also to underscore the fact that Murray’s artistic life began in contrarian Chicago and shifted to the anarchistic Bay Area scene long before taking shape and flourishing in downtown Manhattan.) Largely going it alone in the predominantly male world of painting—which was turning from Tenth Street men’s club to SoHo fraternity, with much-publicized displays of blustering, bad-boy behavior—some of these women were self-conscious feminists from the outset, and some, like Murray, became so more gradually, but nonetheless ardently.

Murray’s comparatively late-blooming feminism was substantiated in the early ’90s by her role in the Women’s Action Coalition, which in 1992, together with the Guerrilla Girls, organized the picketing of the Broadway branch of the Guggenheim Museum, then on the verge of opening with no female artists anticipated in its inaugural show. (In

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

haste, the Guggenheim added grandes dames Louise Bourgeois and Joan Mitchell to the list.) Three years later, Murray again demonstrated the strength of her convictions when Kirk Varnedoe, chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, invited her to mount an Artist's Choice exhibition. For this, her only major curatorial project, Murray ransacked the storage vaults and brought to light a wealth of work by women usually consigned to the shadows—reminding us that women have always been a part of art history, even insofar as MoMA's acquisition policies are concerned, but rarely get their due when that history is presented as images and objects on exhibition. (By gallery maven and gadfly scold Jerry Saltz's reckoning, the proportion of works by women in MoMA's display of art from 1879 to 1969 is even now only 5 percent.) As happy as Murray was to be among the few female artists whose work was regularly shown at the museum—and as proud as she was in 2005 to be one of the handful honored with a retrospective there—her Artist's Choice pointedly proclaimed her refusal to be a stand-in for all the women present in the institution's database yet unaccounted for on its walls.

Murray's tough-minded sense of fairness was born of the school of hard knocks. If, in 1961, as Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara noted in their still-stinging "How to Proceed in the Arts," it was true that Abstract Expressionism had "moved to the suburbs"—that young Americans were choosing to study art with the same assurance they would have had choosing dentistry (today the fantasy comparisons have shifted upward to careers in business and law)—Murray still took nothing for granted. Nor was she in any position to, since during most of her childhood she and her family lived catch-as-catch-can. Her father's chronic illness translated into rents unpaid and apartments hurriedly abandoned in exchange for nights sleeping on the El, followed by reliance on grandparents in small-town Illinois and the kindness of strangers. Even so, from her earliest school days, Murray's natural talent and inventiveness garnered attention, with both her father and mother supporting her artistic vocation. (At the same time, she amused friends by drawing Disney-esque cartoons depicting comic sexual scenarios, and eventually wrote to the Mickey Mouse mogul himself offering to be his secretary—without, of course, mentioning her lewd improvements on his relentlessly wholesome formulas.) When her

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

parents lacked the means to pay for Murray's training even in commercial art, Elizabeth Stein, her high school art teacher, stepped in, conjuring up an anonymous scholarship fund out of her own pocket so that Murray could attend the Art Institute of Chicago.

Between 1958 and 1962, then, exploring the institute's galleries on her way to design and illustration classes, Murray discovered Willem de Kooning's *Excavation*, 1950; Cézanne's still lifes; and, by slow, self-directed stages, the rest of the canon. It would take these four years in Chicago, two more in graduate school at Mills College in Oakland, California, and a two-year stint teaching art at a Catholic college in Buffalo followed by a move to New York in 1967 before the impact of these crucial encounters with classic modernism was fully assimilated. The models they provided first blended with, and then were bent by, her prior fluency in mass-culture idioms, which was itself being enhanced by her growing awareness of Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg, and Andy Warhol—even if her initial cartoon-based pictures dating from 1963 to 1964 effectively make her a young contemporary of those “hand-painted Pop” masters. Having arrived at a vigorously hybrid, boldly ornate vernacular by way of this zigzagging cross-country course, she then stripped it all down to bare bones under the influence of newfound New York contemporaries Jennifer Bartlett, Brice Marden, and Joel Shapiro, artists whose minimal approach countered Murray's penchant for loading up her pictures to the bursting point.

The '70s were in general a bad time for painters, especially the aesthetically law-abiding kind. Greenbergian dogma and its various offshoots had by then so narrowed the scope of art's formal and expressive options that there was little room for maneuver within the mainstream, while all along its banks new media were fostering a jungle of creative alternatives to traditional means. But it was a good time to be a maverick, which Murray had become by virtue of instinct as well as of necessity. The latter included raising a son, Dakota, largely on her own after her first marriage ended in 1973; in due course, it also included caring for two daughters, Daisy and Sophie, with her second husband, poet Bob Holman. In this, Murray helped break the mold by which women artists felt obliged to sacrifice family life in their struggle to make it professionally. Indeed, Murray's hard-won success

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

at “having it all” no matter how rocky the road was an achievement inspiring to many younger artists, both female and male, whose work bears no resemblance to what she made but whose lives are nevertheless indebted to hers.

But what of Murray’s artistic achievement? The fact that she remains an artist that knowledgeable people cannot agree on says a good deal about the stiffness (or, actually, the uncanny pliability) of the challenges she posed and poses to both a wide spectrum of taste and basic assumptions about painting’s potential—and this after the much-debated though obviously premature declarations of the death of painting, which were particularly vocal just as Murray began to exhibit. Such pronouncements were a major feature of those neo-avant-garde tendencies seeking to overthrow the tyranny of retardataire media and usher in a postmodern era dominated by conceptual modes and technological means. Murray took a lively interest in serious—as well as provocatively unserious—art in all its forms. But she took none at all in the will to dominate; nor did she show any deference toward the theoretical alibis attached to art-world power plays. Why? Not out of anti-intellectualism, certainly, but out of a clear understanding that postmodernism, in many of its academic versions, couldn’t have cared less about the things that mattered to her: the vitality of shapes; the polyvalence of color; the physicality of pigment; the intensity of images in metamorphosis; and the tangible possibilities for remaking pictorial space in ways never before contemplated, much less realized. Insofar as she was concerned, if that remaking sometimes entailed garishness, gawkiness, and other excesses, as well as lots of rough edges—well, so be it. Here Murray sided with de Kooning, David Smith, and other American form-givers in thinking that vulgarity in the service of freshness and complexity of experience was not only a fair price to pay, it was a price to be paid exuberantly.

Yet if good taste was not the point of the exercise, neither was stylized bad taste, represented by Funk in the ’60s and synonymous in the early ’80s with “Bad Painting”—the title of a show mounted in 1978 by Marcia Tucker at the New Museum in New York that featured many regional eccentrics and set the tone for certain types of aggressively offbeat stylization that flourished around the edges of neo-

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

expressionism. Murray's wayward way with drawing and variously soupy and caked-up surfaces did prompt parallels with Philip Guston, the old master of the new figuration, however. One of her most searing late paintings, *The Sun and the Moon*, 2004–2005, includes several floating eyes reminiscent of those found in Guston's paintings of the '70s, and those in Johns's Guston-influenced, Bruno Bettelheim–inspired work of the '90s, in effect triggering a retrospective chain reaction of winks across art history that signals the continuity of an alternate tradition within high modernism, with an iconic vernacular poetry as its connecting thread.

As the battle between neo-expressionism and the neo-avant-garde proceeded in the '80s, Murray, like most of the woman painters listed above, was quick to learn that if on the one hand the magazine hype and market share allotted to painters went to the new guys on the block—that being West Broadway between Prince and Spring—the ostensible feminism of many postmodernists on the other did not extend to recognizing the abiding potential of a medium they had determined was intrinsically compromised by the “hero” artist and the implicit “male gaze” (talk about essentialism!) and therefore consigned to art history's dustbin as formal anachronism. Undeterred by the strangely symmetrical neglect of both her gender and her medium, however, Murray pushed the envelope of painting until it turned inside out and warped into Silly-Putty planes, viewer-ensnaring Möbius strips, and pneumatic volumes, creating work that rivaled bubble-writing graffiti artists of the streets and subways for inventiveness and verve. In doing so, Murray not only created wildly pliable vessels for emotional narratives—making the existential yet cliché-bedeviled realities of birth and death, the craving for and estrangement from a lover, and the search for and estrangement from oneself seem overwhelmingly immediate—but also made cataclysmic comedy the full partner of looming disaster. For her, still life wasn't merely a domestic genre; it was a dramatic one that encompassed all the dangers to which flesh is heir. For her, sex wasn't just desire; it was all the fulfilling and distorting corporeal functions that went with it—as is clear in her (rare in modern art) gut-churning renditions of pregnancy from someone who had felt another body grow and differentiate itself in her own.

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

Given all that has been written about Mary Kelly's Post-Partum Document, 1973–79, it is striking how little consideration Murray's parallel project has received—it is probably to a large extent because the artist herself didn't use such specific terminology, and focused on formal rather than written language in works such as Tangled, 1989–90. But it is not all that surprising: Theoretically inclined formalists have consistently missed the radicalism of Murray's formal innovations as well. Ceding nothing to Frank Stella in the domain of the shaped canvas, while always crediting him with having opened her eyes to certain possibilities, Murray found a way to break the stranglehold Cubism had long had on the painted relief. In the early to mid-'80s, with a succession of works such as Painters' Progress, 1981, Keyhole, 1982, Deeper Than D, 1983, and Don't Be Cruel, 1985–86, she gradually began incorporating Surrealist precedents, with the result that for the first time biomorphic images appeared on a biomorphically swollen and convoluted ground instead of a conventionally or jigsaw-cut flat one. For the next twenty-odd years Murray navigated new realms created by self-inverting topology, with a disciplined improvisational freedom that no one else painting could top. Then, having shown what could be done within the vast uncharted territory she had entered, she turned her attention to other problems for the rest of her cruelly abbreviated career, clearly demonstrating that novelty for its own sake was not her goal but merely part of an overall effort to enlarge and refine her art's expressive capacities.

Murray's career did not involve positioning herself in order to create followers. Nor, conversely, did she think of her work as the ultimate step in the march toward an aesthetic absolute that precluded followers. To the extent that her contribution was largely based on paradigm-changing insights about her medium's structural logic—making her paintings groundbreaking for others pursuing the same logic, even without exclusive or preemptive claims—she was a formalist. Significantly, however, she arrived on the scene during the decline of American formalism as it had been systematized from the '40s to the '60s. Murray flourished in the pluralist moment of the '70s, in the anything-goes—or, at least, anything-is-worth-trying—interlude between old high modernism and postmodernism that was vociferously lamented by partisans on both sides who found themselves bereft of

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

teleological certainty. Flux was Murray's element as well as her subject. Her work stands as a demonstration of what it means to give oneself full permission without asking for prior approval from any authority, and as a model of how to proceed on the assumption that those around one are making different choices in the same spirit. In her art, and in her life as an artist, whenever Murray found doors shut, she opened them. Generously, she left them open wide.

*Robert Storr is an artist, critic, and curator, and dean of the Yale School of Art.*

### AMY SILLMAN

ELIZABETH MURRAY'S WORK was not in fashion, and that is exactly what makes it so very interesting. Being fashionable makes you look good and feel successful, camouflaging you in the consensual taste of your time and the issues of your day. But that wasn't Murray's goal. Instead, her work challenged a triumvirate of safety zones: good taste, the "right" art-historical trajectory, and sophisticated feminism. She posed vexing questions with belligerent awkwardness, making her paintings hard for a whole bunch of people to like, even if they wanted to. Come on, admit it: These works aren't cool. They lean in on you and get up in your face, all rounded and overly present like a bucktoothed midwestern cheerleader. The palette is jarring and too bright. The lumpen forms are uncomfortable, either overworked and crafty or totally slapdash. And the gender politics make no sense. Her so-called domestic imagery is more like a thorny essentialist nightmare than a feminist stance. What to do about a female painter who has abandoned her impeccable Minimalist neutrality for pictures of cute animated cups and saucers, shoelaces and beds, all seemingly rendered in a dialect of Cubism, in conversation with Cézanne and Picasso? This seems like barking up all the wrong trees and risking gender troubles from all sides. Murray generally ignored both contemporary European art and the Conceptual schema of her time, lodging herself stubbornly within the history of easel painting. The cost of this was to be regarded in critical circles as painfully old-fashioned, or even politically retrograde.

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

Meanwhile, as a painter she was a badass, a wrestler, ripping it up with the best of them. Her innovations with shaped canvas are as aggressive an inquiry in rethinking the rectangle as has come along, except, of course, with Frank Stella. She was out to rake the frame over the coals, to reformulate formalism, to mess it up and throw it over an edge. She shredded picture planes, pushed them on top of each other, slapping and scraping endless layers of paint or letting colors drip sloppily into emptied gutters that jutted down from gnarly overlaps. For sure, Murray's work never really mutated into proper sculpture that left the wall, nor did it go the way of full-blown installation that ends the dichotomy between space and object once and for all. Indeed, her paintings expressed nothing but love for the tradition of oil paint on canvas on stretcher bars, reveling in those very support structures as bulwarks while doing damage to the traditions that sustain them. What I prize most is Murray's way of overworking a painting almost to death while somehow keeping it looking as if she wasn't really worrying about it. She worked like a rebellious formal deconstructionist whose primary address was to all of painting's heavy lifters, but she was simultaneously plowing over conventional ideas of what masterful technique looks like. Floating like a bumblebee, and stinging like one, too.

Murray was almost a "local" artist in that she was a painter with a specific relationship to her time and place. In the mid to late '70s, she defined a New York-type painting process that had come down from AbEx—a tradition in which the slow, intuitive buildup of innumerable layers and endless alterations was as much a belief system as a way of working. Although this kind of studio practice was already under critical assault in the '70s, Murray was viewed as a kind of hometown hero by many students of painting in New York at the time—especially women—for her defiant engagement with, and against, AbEx painting history. Murray brought a fearless new kind of ugliness to the table that made her work strange and discomforting, against the grain. But by the beginning of the next decade she was eclipsed—by an emerging global gallery scene, by Los Angeles, by German painting, and by a total critical reevaluation of the very art history that she sought to challenge from within. Her process, her stance, and her whole vibe were totally out, and this unfortunately meant that some of what she had

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

accomplished was rendered invisible. Carroll Dunham described Murray in *Artforum* in November 2005 as offering “a completely different way past the modernist dilemma, a forward exit strategy.” Yes, but before this difference is clearer to us, Murray’s language might be all but incomprehensible to an audience unfamiliar with the problematics of her own milieu.

At the time of her 2005 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, I was downright impressed by how much resistance her paintings garnered. One should look carefully at anyone who provokes this much discomfort. But the resistance was itself notable as well. Her work elicited some cringeworthy adjectives: cartoony, expressionistic, domestic, and—oof!—kooky. Some would claim that she got flak because she was a woman painter, but on the other hand even some feminist friends of mine said they couldn’t quite go there. I do not believe that the responses to her show are attributable to her gender alone—a simple charge of the establishment’s misogyny deprives Murray of the credit she is due for her rebellious aesthetics. She tilted her lance purposefully against various taboos of taste, propriety, and gender and thereby exposed some historical problems in painting that she could not, herself, necessarily solve. The strength of the work thus lies partly in its ability to force the question of how tolerant we really are. This question, not to mention the paintings it rides in on, makes for an uncomfortable and eccentric behemoth, forcing us to do an end run around our conventional notions of attraction and repulsion.

Amy Sillman is a New York-based painter.

---