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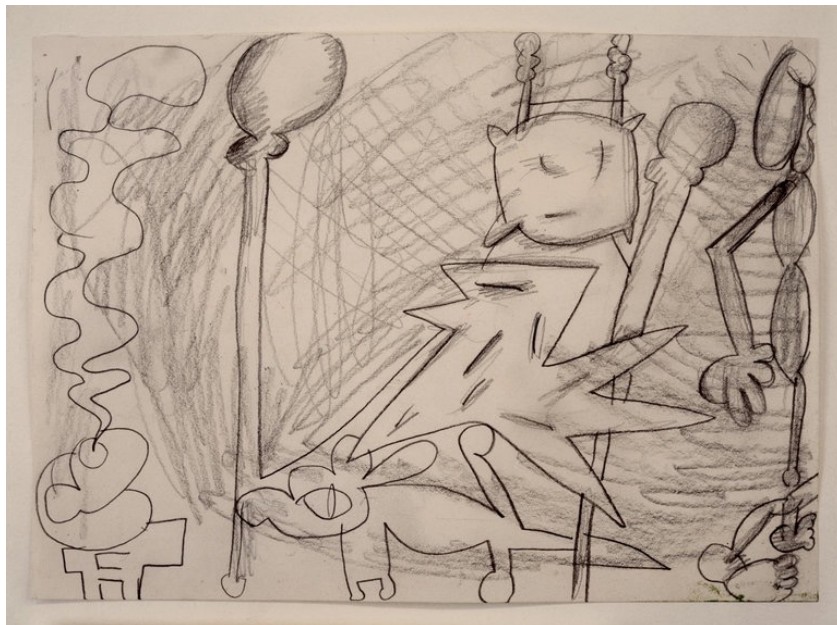
Elizabeth Murray: A Singular Style, Steeped in Many

By ROBERTA SMITH

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Elizabeth Murray was a great painter who didn't have a great late phase. One certainly seemed possible after her 2005 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, but, sadly, she died of cancer in 2007 at the age of 66.

So it's not surprising that the excellent if slightly random survey of Murray's drawings at the gallery Canada, on the Lower East Side, has a bittersweet, if-only undercurrent. It confirms the love of drawing and all its sundry instruments — from traditional pastel to ballpoint pen — at the heart of Murray's art. "Everything comes from drawing out my ideas," she once said. The high quality, diversity and incessant energy of these works also suggest how much more Murray might have accomplished.



Elizabeth Murray's "Look Back" (1995). Credit 2016 The Murray-Holman Family Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Ellen Page Wilson, Pace Gallery

This show has been orchestrated although not exactly selected by the writer, publisher and independent curator Dan Nadel (whose areas of expertise include the comics and the Chicago Imagists inspired by them) and the artist Carroll Dunham, a painter whose work, like Murray's, deliberately treads the border between abstraction and representation and is indebted to cartoons. Mr. Nadel and Mr. Dunham went to Pace Gallery, which represents Murray's estate, and were shown about 50 drawings to select from. They took the whole batch.

It is remarkably effective and includes everything from quick doodles to finished studies in pastel and, later, colored pencil. It even includes one painting — the relatively small, odd "Dust Tracks" — to show where the drawings were headed: toward works full of formal and physical eccentricities, psychological tensions as well as legible images, including in this case a keyhole peeking through what seems to be a jagged break in some ice.

Murray was a hybrid artist, which makes her work seem very pertinent in a moment when younger painters have little interest in purity and a lot in the formal or abstract possibilities of representation. She was a semiabstract painter whose works told domestic, often relationship-centered tales once you realized that her goofy bulbous, splayed or stretchy shapes also doubled as cartoonish figures, furniture, rooms and occasional speech balloons. Such recognition was often aided by titles like "More Than You Know" and "Don't Go."



Elizabeth Murray's "Untitled" (1995).
Credit 2016 The Murray-Holman Family
Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New
York; Ellen Page Wilson, Pace Gallery

This hybridity lay along a Chicago-New York vector, with a stop on the West Coast. Born and raised in the Windy City, Murray had drawn cartoons since grade school and was steeped in the attitudes — namely an equal interest in high and low — of the artists who would soon to be known as the Chicago Imagists. At the School of the Art Institute of Chicago she admired Cézanne's work and de Kooning's paint handling. Attending Mills College outside San Francisco for graduate school, she admired the bold figurative work of Joan Brown and became cognizant of the curvaceous shapes of Arshile Gorky,

precedents for her own. But her goal was always New York, whose modernist tradition included not only Surrealism (a big presence in Chicago) but also Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and Pop.

Through her career, Murray borrowed from all these tendencies, but pursued a style of one, repeatedly taking painting apart and rebuilding it different ways. Her canvases evolved from rectilinear to shaped; broke into fragments and reunited, but gained various protrusions. When flatness returned it again fractured into the elaborate rectangular archipelagoes — or clusters — of small shaped canvasses. This time, each had its own motif or symbol but also functioned as part of a larger image. They are Murray's last works.

The Canada show begins with an exciting vitrine of 14 sketches on modest lined notebook and tablet paper. They confirm how Murray's often complex paintings could begin in quick, almost automatist scribbles and sketches. Drawings wrap around three walls, unfurling Murray's astounding vocabulary of lines, marks and surfaces, her love of color and her finesse with grays and blacks. She masters dense ink cross hatching for "Things Fall Apart," three drawings from 1995, which show her signature form, a coffee cup shattering into pieces. She has a nice dry scribble in the colored pencil drawing for "Bop" and a more refined one for "Brick With Heart," both studies for archipelago paintings.

The sense of domesticity and its discontent is often present, with a brass bedstead making recurring appearances. Sometimes it holds a loving couple ("Little Kiss," 1996); other times, a

convalescing single, shadowed in a rich darkness of ink, gouache, colored pencil and whatnot (“Bed” and “Note + Bed,” both 1994).

In “Look Back,” one of the strongest drawings here, a pencil wielded different ways vividly depicts a bed and two figures leaving separately. The bed’s crumpled blanket takes the deeply serrated form of a cartoon explosion, signaling an unresolved argument. You almost see dust fly.

Some drawings indicate paths not taken. A single sheet from 1995 shows four irregular canvases; two feature assertive stick figures whose rigidity and angularity are a far cry from the usual stretchy, pliant limbs. And a second vitrine introduces an entirely new subject — the landscape! — in colorful topological studies commissioned by Travel & Leisure, which invited several artists to depict one of the 50 states. Murray’s bright, cartoony renderings of mesas, desert, canyons and plant life in Utah are undeniably tantalizing.

Murray was always hard-working and prolific, charging ahead nearly to the end of her life. In the archipelago works unveiled in her last two shows at Pace, in 2003 and 2006, her palette lightens and brightens considerably even as her illness becomes a recurring theme. White, so scarce since her earliest abstractions, returns, either as paint or the actual wall behind the paintings. The sheer exuberance and freedom of these works is stunning, as is the way they depart from and circle back to much that came before. They more than suffice as Murray’s great late works, but I still wish she’d had more time. I also wish some museum would pull up its socks and give her drawings the full retrospective they deserve.

Elizabeth Murray

Through Jan. 29 at Canada, 333 Broome Street, Manhattan; 212-925-4631;
canadanewyork.com.