

JANUARY 2017

Elizabeth Murray at CANADA, New York curated by Carroll Dunham and Dan Nadel



Elizabeth Murray, *Dust Tracks*, 1993, oil on canvas on painted wood, 68 x 46 x 10 inches, courtesy of PACE Gallery and CANADA, New York

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curated by Carroll Dunham and Dan Nadel
Dec. 10th to Jan. 29th, 2016

By DAVID AMBROSE, DEC. 2016

“I realized that I wanted to go in pursuit of the Holy Grail – I wanted to be a painter. It was kind of a magical decision.”

Elizabeth Murray quoted in Paul Gardner, “Elizabeth Murray Shapes Up” *Artnews*, September 1984

Those who go in quest of the Holy Grail have little use for teacups. The painter Elizabeth Murray was known to take offense to having the cups in her paintings referred to as “teacups”, a pejorative term to an artist who was doing plenty of heavy lifting and battling the gender

dragons of the art world. There is nothing dainty about Murray’s work or her handling of materials. She could bend a pipe as well as any strongman or pound a piece of paper into submission with an embossed line of a pen like a blacksmith’s hammer to a sheet of metal on an anvil.

Murray’s magic is on display at CANADA Gallery in a show curated by Carroll Dunham and Dan Nadel. The exhibition gives us the opportunity to look over the shoulder, and perhaps even between the ears, of the late Elizabeth Murray (b. 1940, Chicago; d. 2007, New York). It focuses on her creative process not by examining a large group of Murray’s paintings, but by her approach to drawing (and works on paper) from flint strip to furnace. It brings together over forty examples of drawings and one painting from Murray’s estate from the eighties through 2004. The exhibition is presented in two parts: A front gallery with two highly finished works; a pastel on paper, “For “Dream of Life” from 1988 and a shaped canvas, “Dust Tracks” from 1993; and a second gallery filled with many smaller scaled works that give us an intimate snapshot of her creative process.

The two works in the first gallery greet us like sentinels guarding either side of the entrance to the main gallery space. In the oil painting, “Dust Tracks”, a gray shoe curls forward at heel and toe in the shape of an ampersand, with a single erect and slightly diagonal blue shoe lace with a trefoil opening at the top and a keyhole nestled inside it. What ‘the old woman who lived in a shoe’ kept locked in there is anybody’s guess, but the painting itself is a prime example of Murray’s work at its finest with a double-tiered shaped canvas and wood construction that seems to inflate before our eyes and test the limits of its linen’s elasticity. The canvas appears to

Installation view, Elizabeth Murray courtesy of CANADA Gallery, New York, 2016



struggle to keep hidden the laminated wooden armature like a shirt two sizes too small; its staples exposed at the rounded edges of the wood support. With the exception of the central gray shoe and a wispy, invasive, pneumatic black line, the palette sticks mostly to the primaries which are used to echo the shapes of the shoe and its biomorphic container. The whole brings to mind Marsden Hartley's War Motif series from 1913-15 made to memorialize a fallen lover, German officer Karl von Freyburg who died during World War I.



Elizabeth Murray, Open Door, 1994, India ink, casein, and watercolor on paper with collage, 14 x 11 inches, courtesy of PACE Gallery, New York

The second work, a pastel on collaged paper, "For "Dream of Life", a jaunty, billowing, yellow dress form with a hole in the center hangs both on and off a ragged, red rectangle. Once again Murray relies on the primaries of red, yellow and blue, but this time the blue pastel submits to the wishes of a dominant yellow by blending to become a more acidic blue green shade rather than the vibrant one we see in "Dust Tracks". Murray doesn't so much as draw with her pastels; instead she treats the pastels as a dusty patina that she fuses with the surface of the paper and gives her color both weight and substance.

Whether on canvas or on paper, Murray's work rarely comes across as clean, bright, or delicate. There's nothing fussy about it. It's sooty, chipped, stained, dripped, ripped, torn, lumpy, bumpy, wobbly, bulbous, and wrinkled. Served up like a heaping slice of life, albeit a slice that comes with

distractions like raising a family or the hardship of battling cancer. And in spite of those difficulties, work she did. And if the variety materials - sixteen to this reviewer's count - on view in this show are any indication, she worked (and more importantly experimented) ceaselessly.

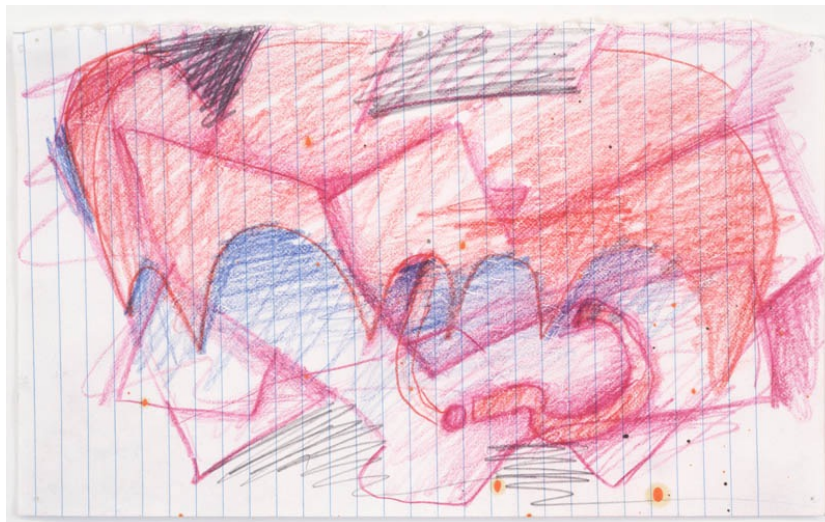
The sooty patina of the pastel in "For "Dream of Life" masks the fact that Murray's color bears a strong resemblance to that of the painter, Wayne Thiebaud - especially around those raggedy edges. Murray would frequently outline with a crayon of contrasting color which would both define a shape and act as a binder to hold the pastel in place. Thiebaud, who knew a thing or two about slices from his countless still life paintings of cakes and pies, would use color to create an optical jump in the shadows and at borders in his work. That Murray might respond to Thiebaud's color is less of a surprise when you consider that when both artists were young they shared a desire to work at the Pop Palace, the Walt Disney Studios in Burbank, California (and in Thiebaud's case that desire became a reality for one summer while he was in high school).

Upon entering the second gallery, we are surrounded by works on paper that fall into four categories: idea sketches or notes; studies with direct relationships to finished works; a group of illustrations for a piece in *Travel and Leisure* magazine; and standalone highly finished drawings. The smallest of these sketches, many on lined paper torn from notebooks, have the feel of a personal currency. The room reads a little like a time capsule left behind by a private naturalist with entomological specimens encased in vitrines or framed behind glass. These weren't butterflies or other insects gathered in the field though, they are the remains found in the inky web of a ravenous spider.



Installation view, Elizabeth Murray
courtesy of CANADA Gallery, New
York, 2016

Many of these drawings are so dense with marks that they don't feel like they are made on paper at all. In "Untitled" from 1990, Murray uses gouache, pen and ink but the whole has more of a feel akin to the metalworking process of niello where an incised design is inlaid with a black metallic mixture is then heated, bonding it to the surface. The paper buckles from both the pressure of the pen lines and the saturation of the ink while white gouache highlights rescue the interwoven tubular shape from drowning in a sea of black ink. In "Open Door" from 1994, washes of watercolor are suffocated at the expense of collage forms added to the paper. It's as if Murray stamps down her collage elements with a machine press squeezing the black ink lines out from their sides. A single plate sits on the table with a curious half-moon eye shape that calls to mind Odilon Redon's, "Eye-Balloon" from 1878 (Redon, in fact, was the subject of a major retrospective which was co organized by the Art Institute of Chicago in 1994).



Elizabeth Murray, "Why?"
Painting, 1987, Pencil and colored
pencil on paper, 4.625 x 7.5
inches, courtesy of PACE Gallery,
New York

Murray's bending of the rules and the space they occupy begins with the edges of her paper. She seems at odds with the rectangle with few exceptions. Even the machine cut and lined notebook pages come with rips and tears creating subtle

irregularities. Only a triptych of a panicked figure executed on three pieces of Ramada Inn branded note paper, "Ramada Drawing" from 1992 seems to hold its borders, but even then Murray has spun two of the sheets so the burgundy banners read upside-down. In "Why?"

Painting”, a colored pencil sketch from 1987, a question mark lies defeated on its side in the foreground surrounded by a jumble of arches. A dense, layered, rhythmic cacophony of shuffled space, this simple sheet of lined paper seems to answer the big question most on the mind of Murray for her entire life; Why? Painting.

And so with that the holidays arrive a little early this year with this gift of a show. Just don't expect a perfectly wrapped package. Expect one with exposed tape, wrinkles and more than a few lumps. And “Whazzat” inside is the work of an artist of the highest order and one who was certainly worthy of pursuing and protecting the Holy Grail of painting **WM**

<http://www.whitehotmagazine.com/articles/by-carroll-dunham-dan-nadel/3579>

DAVID AMBROSE

David Ambrose is an artist and critic living and working in Bound Brook, New Jersey. He has exhibited both nationally and internationally. He is the currently the subject of a mid-career retrospective entitled, “Repairing Beauty”, at the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton, New Jersey. He has taught at Parsons, The New School for Design, Pratt Institute and the Fashion Institute for Technology.