

# TWO COATS OF PAINT

January 15, 2017

## ***Art and Film: Elizabeth Murray and the splendor of the ordinary***

9:59 am by Sharon Butler



*Elizabeth Murray, Everybody Knows, 2007.*

Contributed by Jonathan Stevenson / Elizabeth Murray, who died too young at 66 in 2007, stretched and contorted household scenes and objects into kinetic abstract festivals on baroquely shaped canvases that defied and escaped the presumed domestic tyranny of wifely and motherly duty. That may be what a Guerrilla Girl – fittingly interviewed in her mask for Kristi Zea’s documentary *Everybody Knows ... Elizabeth Murray*, screening this week at the Film Forum – means when she says that the groundbreaking painter was “a feminist without having to talk about it.” The film is an exemplary integration of personal history, cultural context, and the exposition of the artistic process. It is perhaps a bit more elegiac than analytic, and only starts what should be a long conversation about a great artist who merits recognition as one for the ages.

An additional factor in Murray’s sublimated brand of feminism was that when she was getting started in New York the 1970s, it was extremely difficult for a female painter, buffeted by peremptory male Minimalists and Pop artists who had learned from the AbExers how to marginalize women, to get a solo show. Yet the rewards were obvious. An avuncularly trenchant Chuck Close – the Elmore Leonard of the art world – notes that back then every painter in New York would go to any fellow painter’s opening, then gather at Max’s Kansas City to talk about the work. The quietly driven Murray, whose influences ranged from the Cubists to the AbExers and Minimalists to The Hairy Who, had a unique gestalt to offer and fervently wanted her canvases to become the subject of that discussion. She had little time for discrete political posturing; she had to work and hustle.

Yet she did not capitulate to ambition existentially, having two daughters while in her forties after raising a son. All three of her children testify to Murray’s dedication as both an artist and a mother. She seemed able to reconcile the two roles in seeing and evoking the splendor of the ordinary. It helped that she was apparently a frank, well-balanced, and fundamentally modest person, true to her personal inspirations. She did not bow to the market aesthetically, either, painting only what she was moved to paint and never losing the sheer tactile joy of applying brush to canvas (just watch her as she struggles past her frailty while making *Everybody Knows*, her last painting).

Warm but candid, Murray was grateful to Paula Cooper for sticking with her though painfully cognizant of her own calculation – sourced in an unstable and materially insecure childhood in Illinois – in leaving Cooper for Pace to ensure higher prices for her work. Her success brought her confidence, but without vanity. She often eschewed a hat, wig, or scarf even as she lost her abundant hair from cancer treatment. A constant, even as her life visibly ebbed, was her bighearted smile. She may have taken satisfaction in having inspired other women artists to come to New York, confront the men, and play in the big leagues. Perhaps Murray also knew that in her extreme attenuations of and appropriations to everyday objects, she had formally established a unique equilibrium between the abstract and the figurative – and found a place in art history – while preserving in her work a playful and irrepressible humanity.

Also on view:



*Elizabeth Murray, For Bounding Dog, 1993, watercolor and crayon on paper.*

“Elizabeth Murray curated by Carroll Dunham and Dan Nadel,” CANADA, Lower East Side, New York, NY. Through January 29, 2017.