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GALLERIES • WEEKEND

Elizabeth Murray, Force of Nature

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Thomas Micchelli | 2 days ago



Elizabeth Murray, "Dust Tracks" (1993), oil on canvas on painted wood, 68 x 46 x 10 inches (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Life-affirming: a descriptor redolent of Panglossian naiveté that I'd ordinarily avoid at all costs. But it's the one that won't go away as I attempt to form my thoughts about Elizabeth Murray's show of more than 50 drawings and a single painting at CANADA on the Lower East Side.

Maybe it's foremost in my mind because, in the context of the exhibition, "life-affirming" is double-edged. Murray's images are so alive they leap off the wall — dozens of drawings quivering with kick-ass impulsiveness — but they can't dispel the cloud of her untimely death in 2007, taken by lung cancer a month shy of her 67th birthday.



Elizabeth Murray, "For 'Dream of Life'" (1988),
pastel on paper, 28.25 x 50.375 inches

And so bittersweet might be the better term, but it falls short. "Dust Tracks" (1993), the sole painting in the show and the first thing you encounter as you walk through the door, reaches out and grabs you in a lurching embrace; a raucous concoction of swells, swirls, and cutaway voids, it's more sculpture than painting, a human-scaled riposte to Frank Stella's steamrolling *Moby-Dicks* (1986-88) from the decade before.

There is nothing bitter or sweet about this antsy, unnamable biomorph; refusing to stay put in its own painterly space, it reels like a drunk into ours — willfully rude and buoyantly playful, a jolt of unalloyed energy.

And the dozens of drawings that make up the rest of the show are no less fractious, in their content or in their making. Cups shatter, clouds gather, and humanoid limbs stretch like elastic bands. Murray can squeeze ink out of a nib like juice from a lemon, dilating the paper with quick jabs of carbon and water, the building blocks of life, until it bulges and breathes.

Like her Chicago Imagist cohort (Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Roger Brown, Barbara Rossi, Karl Wirsum, and Ed Paschke), Murray never sanctified her surface with flatness or opticality, but instead adulterated it into a theater of

saucy grotesques — a space she would eventually blow up and reconfigure into a character in itself, a golem molded from the painting's ground. Her shaped canvases gallop across the wall, but their elaborate stretchers clue us in to the extensive planning and absolute precision that their construction demanded.

In contrast, her work on paper is utterly free-form, a launchpad for a gamut of choices that rush from points A to Z with head-snapping speed. Even a relatively formal piece like “For ‘Dream of Life’” (1988) — a large pastel composed primarily of a yellow mass evoking a bifurcated tuba framed by an irregular red rectangle, a riven spirit on a flying carpet — feels immediately more improvisational than “Dust Tracks” on the facing wall, the only other occupant of the gallery’s front room.

Paper shapes are cut out and laid atop one another, with smaller pieces looping around the upper half like dancing bones. The cutouts are simultaneously images and objects: the composition is as much arranged and pasted as it is drawn and colored. Although “For ‘Dream of Life’” remains relatively flat in its shadowbox frame, its scale and presence makes it a match for “Dust Tracks,” ping-ponging your eye between their opposing walls.



Elizabeth Murray, Drawing from “Things Fall Apart” (1995), watercolor and ink on paper, 13.5 x 10 inches

The second, larger room is filled with smaller but no less vital drawings and sketches, many with collage elements. There are also two vitrines extending like shelves from the walls on either side of the entranceway, which hold an array of unframed sheets, some torn from notebooks and spattered with paint and coffee stains. Many of them are obviously working drawings, jottings for larger projects, but the fluidity of ideas coursing throughout the show, which was curated by Carroll Dunham and Dan Nadel with an eye toward the rhythms flowing from multiple motifs, materials, and states of finish, in essence turns everything on display into a working drawing of one kind or another. In fact, in her *New York Times* review of this exhibition, Roberta Smith quotes Murray as stating, “Everything comes from drawing out my ideas.”

Nothing feels settled; everything is in flux. This is especially true of “Things Fall Apart” (1995), a set of three drawings in crayon, watercolor, and ink depicting the fragments of a blasted cup. The resulting shards, however, mysteriously retain the cup’s original shape, as if suspended in a force field. Each drawing presents a slightly different kind of vessel: one has a pedestal base; another seems to include an equally fragmented saucer; while the third is more pitcher than

cup. The shards are practically sculpted out of the black hatch marks that fill the negative space, ice floes on a black sea. While these three drawings don't reveal themselves as self-evident variations or progressions (as we find in the work of Henri Matisse or Pablo Picasso, moving the same subject from figuration to abstraction), there is a sense of oneness about them, that Murray had an idea, played it out, and moved on.

Perhaps it's the speed and restlessness of these works, compounded by a profound infatuation with the act of drawing, that make them so affecting. They are a testament to Murray as a force of nature, never hesitating, never stopping, always on the go. And so it was a little puzzling to



Elizabeth Murray, "Untitled" (1990), gouache and ink on paper with collage, 10.5 x 8.25 inches

read Roberta Smith's lament that Murray, by dying at 66, "was a great painter who didn't have a great late phase."

"Late phase" is not easy to define in terms of age, given that Rembrandt, who had one of the greatest late phases in the history of Western art, died when he was 63. Maybe Smith feels that Murray's art, unlike Rembrandt's or Goya's or Rothko's, never attained a sense of the tragic, but I would respectfully disagree.

Among the drawings in this show, whose dates range from 1985 to 2004, we find more than enough elements of unease: the darkly rendered, twisting, fragmented forms inhabiting two untitled works from 1990 — one in India ink and gouache, the other in gouache and ink with collage; the anarchy and disintegration of the jumbled shapes in "Swoop" (2004), drawn in brightly colored felt-tip pen;

and the somberly rendered, absurdly distorted figure comprising "Whozat #2 (Drawing for Whazzat #1 Print)" (1995), in pastel and charcoal on shaped paper.

There are also two drawings, done in an array of blacks and grays, of a figure in a bed, both from 1994: "Bed," in India ink, gouache, colored pencil, and printed paper on spiral-edge paper; and "Bed + Note," in India ink, silkscreen ink, gouache, and collage. In both drawings, the ant-like

figure, who appears to be naked except for a pair of Guston-y shoes, is attempting some kind of engagement with the viewer. In “Bed,” he raises an enormous, cartoonish hand in greeting, and in “Bed + Note,” a speech balloon emerges from his mouth, but instead of words, it contains a few musical notes unmoored from a staff, as if he were whistling a feeble tune at the edge of his demise. The tragic in Murray is deeply felt but never pure, a Beckettian tragicomedy that hits you when you aren’t looking. The beauty of her art is that it is never one thing or another. It can be giddy and ponderous, sweet and scathing, very often in the same picture. The curators’ installation recognizes Murray’s heterogeneity by decidedly de-emphasizing the serialism in her work. Her oft-repeated cups are not grouped together, nor are the several “Whozat” drawings. The exhibition skips along, from one frame of mind to another, yet the force of Murray’s personality persuades us to accept it as a whole. The tragic is there, and then it’s gone, and then it’s back again, a 24-hour news cycle of bleakness and burlesque, and a mottled affirmation of life as we now know it.



Elizabeth Murray
curated by Carroll
Dunham and Dan Nadel
continues at CANADA (333
Broome Street, Lower East
Side, Manhattan) through
January 29.
(Please note: CANADA will
be closed on Friday,
January 20.)

Elizabeth Murray, “Bed + Note” (1994), India ink, silkscreen ink, and gouache on paper with collage, 10.5 x 9 inches

