

Elizabeth Murray CANADA



Elizabeth Murray, *For "Flesh Table"*, 1986, colored pencil on paper, 7 3/4 x 4 3/4". © The Murray-Holman Family Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Remembered deeply fondly by those who knew her for her intelligence and warmth, the late Elizabeth Murray, who died in 2007, was also a heroine for many artists, both as a painter who came up in the 1960s and '70s, when painting seemed increasingly in crisis, and as a woman in a man's or boy's world. Growing out of this embattled place, Murray's work was as brave as it was funny, as determined as it was adventurous and odd. Her presence in today's art world—hell, today's world—is greatly missed.

The drawings in this welcome exhibition dated from the 1980s to the early 2000s and ranged from brief sketches through working drawings—ideas and plans for paintings—to finished independent works. According to Roberta Smith, reviewing the show in the *New York Times*, the curators—the painter Carroll Dunham and the curator and writer Dan Nadel—operated on a principle of no principle: Having approached Murray's gallery, Pace, to ask for drawings to

choose from, they simply took everything offered them. I'm not sure an omnivore strategy would always be wise in curating, but Murray relied hugely on drawing as a mode of thought, and the humblest drawing here repaid attention.

For "Flesh Table", 1986, for example, on a small, uneven sheet of lined notepaper, seems to show a figure with clear arms and legs and an anxious, Edvard Munch-like face. Covering the figure's lap is a table whose legs seem to climb his or her body. The finished painting (which I viewed on Murray's website), from the same year, is rather different: For one thing, it's the other way up from the drawing, though it's unclear to me whether Murray herself made this switch or whether the curators hung the drawing so as to emphasize the figure. In the painting that figure is almost invisible, the clearest trace of it being a single large hand, a new addition off to the side. What had been its legs are now the legs of the table, which has developed a jagged fracture down its center, as if to preserve the anxiety communicated by the face in the drawing. Appearing at the bottom rather than at the top, and made the source of a red line that snakes upward along the figure's torso, that face now appears as an electrical socket in the wall. (I'm quite sure other readings are equally viable.)

Probably the drawing was made early on in the development of *Flesh Table* and these changes should not surprise us. They are typical, though, of Murray's process: I remember that when I wrote about her for *Artforum* in 1998, tracking the making of a single painting, the work went through a long series of alterations, continuing well after she told me, "I've definitely had enough." More important, in any case, is the direction in which the changes to *Flesh Table* went, toward ambiguity and the multiplicity of associations that arise when an image can't be instantly read and has to be puzzled through. In Murray's art, people and things are always in process, are always more than one thing at the same time, like the table that seems ambiguously human. Every move between the drawing and the painting shows Murray's polymorphous imagination powerfully asserting itself.

For "Flesh Table" is a sketch; more immediately rewarding were the more polished drawings. *Things Fall Apart*, 1995, is a sequence of three cups, a favorite motif of Murray's here shown in fragments, so that seeing that they are cups demands assembling them in the mind. A group of landscapes of Utah, from 1998, are like colored-in George Herrimans; *For "Bounding Dog"*, 1993, has rather more of the goofy happiness only a dog can supply than the final painting does. One of the drawings I found most interesting was *Brick with Heart*, 2003. It contains more geometric shapes than Murray generally used—her forms are most often biomorphic—but those shapes are jumbled together and broken up to generate her usual sense of ambiguous permutability. And somewhere in there, squeezed into a rectangle, is a heart. Why wouldn't a brick have a heart? It's hard to imagine anyone but Murray making that combination.

—David Frankel

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