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ELIZABETH MURRAY

October 23, 2005 – January 9, 2006

The Museum of Modern Art

Elizabeth Murray: Shape Shifter

There is no progress in art, only the recognition of opportunity and the consequences of its being acted upon. Those consequences register as new opportunities, which in turn await recognition and action. Modern art consists of the historical proliferation of such possibilities brought about by the relaxation—but never the definitive dissolution or destruction—of the earlier aesthetic traditions. That process began in the nineteenth century and rapidly gathered force in the early twentieth century.

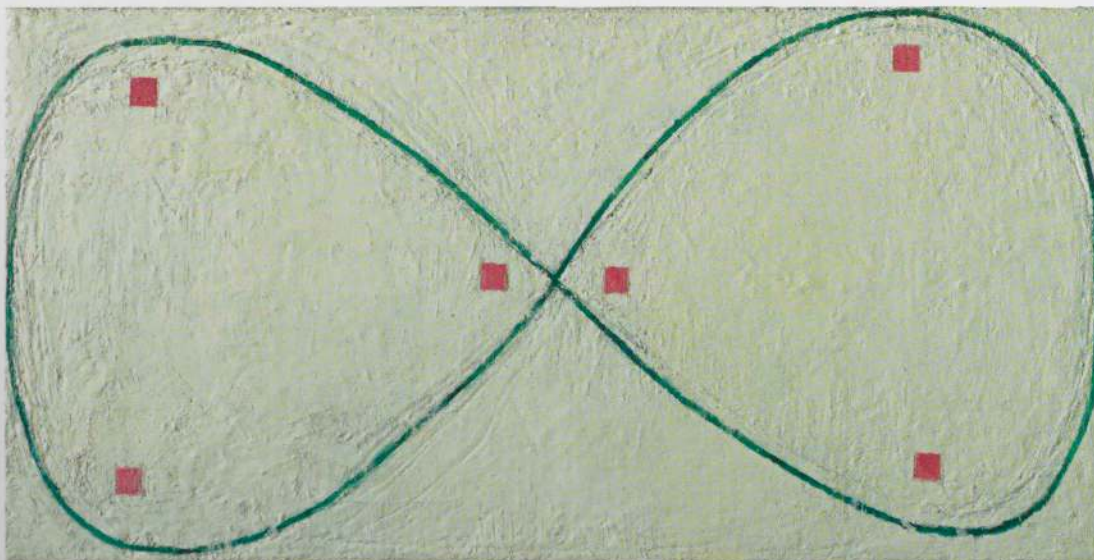
Among the tendencies that gave modernism its protean character, Cubism and Surrealism were the most influential during the period between World War I and World War II. To a large extent, avant-garde painting in America was forged by tension between them, with Abstract Expressionism representing their provisional synthesis and partial supercession. Postwar painting in this country developed in a variety of directions, but almost always those developments can be traced back to the convergence of these two movements. The first, Cubism, was predicated on fracturing the classical idea of pictorial reality and the orderly conventions of geometric perspective that structured it; the second, Surrealism, proposed that reality was in fact as malleable and metamorphic as it appeared to be in dreams.

By the end of the 1960s it was widely assumed that all the basic combinations implicit in this fusion had been played out. The modernist mainstream—represented on the one hand by the allover gestural abstraction of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, and its attenuation in the “stain painting” of Helen Frankenthaler, and on the other by allover geometric field painting, its great exemplars in Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt and its consolidation in the work of the late 1950s prodigy Frank Stella—was on the verge of running dry. Meanwhile innovations in sculpture, mixed media, installation, performance art, photography, video, and various

conceptual modes threatened to eclipse painting if not render it permanently anachronistic.

But if, despite avant-garde myth, there are no absolute ruptures in tradition, neither are traditions automatically self-rejuvenating, including what Abstract Expressionist critic Harold Rosenberg called “The Tradition of the New.” Fresh vitality necessarily comes from fresh insight, and that almost inevitably is the contribution of artists who see the same set of variables everybody else does from a radically different angle. Enter Elizabeth Murray.

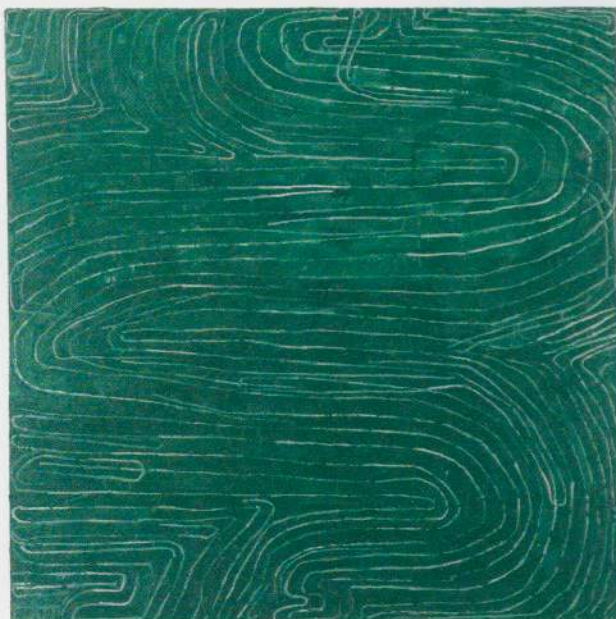
Born in Chicago in 1940, Murray came of age in small-town Midwest America in the conservative 1950s. That location and those times were not very propitious ones for a young person of modest means to dream of becoming an artist, especially if that person was a woman. Thanks to the anonymous financial support of a high school art teacher and the moral support of both parents, Murray nevertheless found her way back to the city of her birth and to the school of its major museum, The Art Institute of Chicago. She entered with the practical-minded intention of training to be a commercial artist, but in the galleries of the Art Institute she saw great painting for the first time. The pivotal discovery was the work of Paul Cézanne, in particular two still lifes and a portrait of his wife that were in the museum's collection. The latter supplied the basic motif for Murray's own comic strip-like homage to the artist, *Madame Cézanne in Rocking Chair* (1972), while the former inspired her own preoccupation with this supposedly domestic genre, one which she has turned upside down and inside out in the decidedly un-still lifes she started making in the early 1980s and continues to make to this day. Other “finds” during these early days in Chicago included works by the Cubists, notably Juan Gris; by the Surrealists, Salvador Dalí and Joan Miró in particular; by Expressionists such as Max Beckmann; and by the Abstract Expressionists, for Murray most memorably represented in the museum's galleries by de Kooning's *Excavation* (1950),



the largest and most complete statement of what has been called his "liquid Cubism."

Inspired by these examples, by the vitality of the city and the students around her, and by the sheer excitement she experienced in her initial trial-and-error plunges into the medium, Murray declared her ambition as a painter and soon distinguished herself among her peers. Her four years at the Institute were followed by graduate study at Mills College, near San Francisco, where she fell into the even more bohemian environment of the postbeatnik Bay Area of the early 1960s. There she was introduced to other variants on Abstract Expressionist painterliness; for instance the work of Clyfford Still, a member of the so-called first generation New York School, whose roots were in fact in the West, and Joan Brown, a figurative artist of the next generation, who had learned how to build heavy pigmented surfaces from Still and his peers, and then just kept on loading them up until they acquired a lava thickness and flow. In addition, Murray felt the impact of West Coast Funk, a craft-oriented tendency rich in vernacular humor, in which her Bay Area acquaintance and contemporary Bruce Nauman was steeped. And then in the midst of all this comparatively forthright work, she suddenly caught her first glimpse of the enigma of Pop art, specifically, paintings by Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol. That encounter turned her head eastward. By 1965 she had made it as far as Buffalo, New York, where she supported herself by teaching while making outrageously colorful, frequently jokey painted reliefs and sculptures—a small-format version of which can be seen in *Night Empire* (1967–68)—that owe something in their cartoon exuberance to Claes Oldenburg and Red Grooms, but much more to Walt Disney, whose loopy drawing style she imitated as a child. (While still a girl, she had gone so far as to write to Disney offering to be his secretary, in what amounts to a latter-day demonstration of Horatio Alger-like "pluck." Although of course all Alger's heroes were boys.)

In 1967, Murray moved to New York City, where she soon found another teaching job. Two years later, she and her husband of four years had a son. Henceforth, Murray's life consisted of juggling jobs, child care, and studio time. Despite these competing demands her drive was unabated, as evidenced by canvases from the early to mid-1970s, when she made significant changes in her approach, thus preparing the ground for a breakthrough at the end of the decade. Reflecting both their experimental nature and the restraints of her situation, most of the early 1970s paintings are modestly scaled—certainly in comparison to the sprawling works that were soon to follow. In some, such as an untitled painting of 1970, Murray returns to and reconfigures Cézanne. In others, such as *Beer Glass at Noon* (1971), she shows her interest in the dark browns, grays, and off-key hues of Juan Gris, a palette that reappears in the 1980s, when once again she paints fluid-bearing—or fluid-spilling—vessels, as in *Yikes*, *Beam*, and *Keyhole* (all 1982). By 1973, however, her imagery had been drastically pared down, and her painterly touch evened out



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1. *Möbius Band*. 1974. Oil on canvas, 14 x 28" (35.6 x 71.1 cm). Collection Linda and Martin Weissman. Photo: Tim Thayer, Ferndale, Mich. 2. *Wave Painting*. 1973. Oil on canvas, 58 1/4 x 58" (149.2 x 147.3 cm). Private Collection. Photo: James Dee, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York 3. *Yikes*. 1982. Oil on canvas, two panels, 9'7" x 9'5 1/2" (292.1 x 288.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Douglas S. Cramer Foundation, 1991. Photo: Geoffrey Clements, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

though by no means smooth. Responding to Minimalism's pervasive impact, Murray chose simple repetitive designs. Some were quasi-organic seashell-, fan-, or rakelike patterns whose brittle, splayed linear elements completely filled her diminutive formats, pressing out against their confining edges, for example *Heart Beat #1, #2, and #3* (all 1973); others, consisting of stacked or staggered boxes such as *Blue Inside-Outside* (1974), *White Down Step* (1973), and the wonderfully sketchy, wonderfully teetering *Blue-Yellow-Left-Right* (also 1973) were more or less rectilinear geometries, as was also true of the ladderlike images in *Shrinking Lines Embracing in the Center* (1974). Yet while Murray temporarily fell under the spell of Minimalist austerity, using it to clean out the residue of her previous kitchen-sink manner, she could not resist inflecting this generally hands-off style with her own hands-on touch and feel for syncopated composition.

That rhythmic sensibility pulses through *Wave Painting* (1973) but is also palpable in the tighter "Möbius Strip" paintings of 1974, both of which in effect diagram the fundamental model for much that was to come. By definition, a Möbius strip is a continuous surface that twists and binds without breaking, thereby demonstrating the principle behind all topological surface geometries, namely homeostasis. This elastic quality allows shapes to be subjected to extreme

manipulations, with their contours being dramatically distended or contorted—operations that would fracture and destroy rigid planar structures—and yet retain their inherent integrity as mathematically consistent entities. It would be overstating the case to say that Murray's subsequent paintings were strictly topological in this sense, or that they excluded the possibility of rupture. To the contrary, cracking, tearing, and the threat of separation are basic to her pictorial dynamics as well as to the psychological subtext of her imagery. However, as a metaphor, topological homeostasis holds open the possibility that at the outer limits of stress, shapes can morph into eccentric but still recognizable permutations of themselves, and, correspondingly, that the object's narrative subjects can too.

Thus the already cited Surrealist dimension of Murray's work encompasses not just a superficial resemblance to the organic blobs and bulges found in Miró and Dalí, but also an underlying formal logic and poetics. In the first stages of Murray's mature development, these Surrealist elements were melded with other stylistic heritages: the rich pigmentation and saturated color of Stuart Davis, the untethered bars, squares, circles, and image compounds of Russian Suprematists such as Kazimir Malevich and Liubov' Popova, and traces of cartooning, all of which are visible in works like *Children Meeting* (1978). But starting with *Tug* and *With* of the same



year, the angular framing edge of the canvas itself began to behave like the outline of the angular things inside it, leading, in 1981, to *Painter's Progress*, in which a biomorphic palette and brushes (representing topological Surrealism) hold together the shattered fragments of the conventional picture plane (representing Euclidean Cubism under duress)—thus showing the homeostasis of the first in tension with its antithesis in the disintegration of the second.

Murray would be the last person to discuss the issue in these terms—she doesn't like art made in the service of issues—but that personal preference does not make her any less of an innovator in the history of modernist painting, and the proof lies in the next move she made. In *Heart and Mind* (1981), jagged forms are contained by curved forms in one panel, while the opposite occurs in the other panel, the pair resulting in a kind of intimate but abstract coupling, where the lightning-bolt energy of the first confronts the soft but swelling weight of the second. In many ways *Heart and Mind* was both a distillation and template for Murray's flat abstractions—but then, her paintings didn't stay flat for long.

Coming right on the heels of Murray's reconfiguration of the shaped canvas painting, conceived of as an object flush to the wall (experiments with this option began in the 1920s and came to their American apogee in the early 1960s in Frank Stella's work), in *Beam and Fly By* (both 1982) she began to build out from the wall in layers, and then in *Keyhole* to pry the canvas up off the wall like a piece of warped paneling that is being pulled away from its structural support. By 1984, the combination of layering and cantilevering panels gave Murray the technical means to realize *Can You Hear Me?*—among the most animated and complex uses of the new idiom she had created. Although it too shows Murray's affinity for the comics, the central image—a howling face—was inspired by early modernist Edvard Munch's expressionist icon *The Scream* (1893), reminding us that no matter how playful some aspects of her style may be, anguish as much as antic invention sets its tenor.

After a decade of avant-garde practice in which art-world attention focused primarily on new media, the 1980s saw a sudden resurgence of painting, and of Neo-Expressionist painting in particular. Although Murray became an increasingly prominent presence against that background, for a host of reasons her work never seemed to fit into the latter tendency, despite its breadth. Recognizing the ways in which it overlaps with but stands apart from many stylistic categories past and present, it may be argued that—like the compositional devices of individual canvases—Murray's art thrives on incongruity. No picture of the period makes the extremes to which that can lead more explicit than *Don't Be Cruel* (1985–86). A visual riff on the title of the old Elvis Presley song, and the most convoluted version of the tensions previously described between stiff planarity (the table image) and topological pliability (the Silly Putty torquing of the canvas), *Don't Be Cruel* wreaks havoc with the concept of the stability of home in ways that



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simultaneously make one laugh and wince. Whereas only the watches and a mustached polyp in Dalí's 1931 classic *The Persistence of Memory* droop, here everything flops and spirals. Furthermore, here, for the first time in modernism, the shape of biomorphic painting is subject to the same deformations as the shapes depicted in it.

The signal importance of this discovery that the inside (image) and the outside (contour) of the picture could be treated in the same terms cannot be overstated, though Murray's otherwise traditional technique and her refusal to make large claims for such formal challenges to the status quo tended to distract from the originality of what she had actually done. Nevertheless, the wild conclusions Murray herself promptly drew from this discovery made the point. Starting in the late 1980s, pictorial flatness—that shibboleth of formalist painting in the 1960s—is almost entirely subsumed by volumes that thrust or press out toward the viewer, as if a wall-bound skeleton of wood covered with painterly skin were trying to touch that other volumetric skin-covered skeleton staring back at it. And so while *Don't Be Cruel* aggressively corkscrews above the viewer's head, others, like *Trembling Foot* (1988), seem

4. *Don't Be Cruel*. 1985–86. Oil on canvas, 9'7" x 9'8" x 14" (261.6 x 264.2 x 35.6 cm). Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; The Henry L. Hillman Fund, 1986. Photo: James Dee, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. 5. *Euclid*. 1989. Oil on canvas, 8'9 1/2" x 6'10" x 13 1/4" (268 x 208.3 x 33.7 cm). Collection Dr. and Mrs. John T. Chiles. Photo: Geoffrey Clements, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

fleshier and more yielding yet equally intent on making contact. Reprising the idea of the vessel, which preoccupied Murray in the early-to-mid-1980s, *Wonderful World* (1988) and *Tangled* (1989–90) render this glass/cup image ever more explicitly uterine, leaving the viewer in the not altogether comfortable position of standing before the bellying forms of the painting like a newborn in the lap of its mother. From that fantastic perspective, *Dis Pair* (1989–90) resembles monstrous inverted variants on fairy tale shoes stamping above one's head, though the image owes as much to the late work of Philip Guston as it does to Mother Goose or the Brothers Grimm. *Quake Shoe* (1992–93) takes that sense of Lilliputian jeopardy one giant, figurative step further and then cuts the ground out from under it.

Periodically, Murray has reverted to conventional rectangular stretchers to regain her bearings, and she did so again in *Bounding Dog* (1993–94), which features an exuberant cousin to the red canine that erupted from beneath a table ten years earlier in *Sleep* (1983–84). When Murray next addressed the shaped canvas, it was no longer expansive. Rather, she began to assemble numerous small-to-moderate-sized units into jumbled amalgams. Conceived in successive stages of drawing and then jigsaw-cut much like the larger supports she had made throughout the previous decade and a half, but less sculptural in aspect, each of these carefully planned, heavily worked units is in essence a painting all by itself. One has only to zero in on the alternately gritty and succulent edges of these

modules, and the densely impastoed emblems they surround, to grasp how much each module is like a self-contained volcanic island in an archipelago of mini-abstractions. Yet packed together inside parenthetical curves and brackets, they look like Pop hieroglyphs, or visually slangy parts of speech inside comic strip thought-balloons bursting at the seams. These chattering forms are on the whole brightly colored—the moody schemes of the 1980s having generally given way to dazzling scarlets, oranges, lurid pinks, violets, royal purples, lemon yellows, leafy greens, and sky blues. Moreover the discrete sections are separated by gaps that bring the intense white of the wall behind them into the overall composition like flashing highlights. The result makes the eye jump from hot spot to cool spot and so on around the optical maze they collectively describe, but the sensation created by this ceaseless readjustment of visual focus lends them the quality of recombinant molecules and the whole to which the busy parts contribute the character of a quivering multicellular organism.

In none is this geological/syntactical/biological mixing and mismatching more apparent than the most recent painting in the exhibition, *Do the Dance* (2005). Once again Murray has gleaned her title from popular music, this time borrowing a phrase from a Ray Charles–Betty Carter hit of the 1960s. The full verse is “Do the dance of love.” Corny? Perhaps, though Murray is careful to drop the last tell-tale word, leaving it to the viewer's imagination—or memory—to complete the lyric. Behind the seemingly user-friendly demeanor Murray's work





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sometimes projects, there is daring, especially at a time such as the present, when corrosive irony is the prevailing mode in mass culture, and distancing effects are the norm for advanced aesthetics. In such a context, Murray may strike some observers as unfashionably eager to reach out to the public. However, that would be to ignore the way in which her underlying ironies cut deep—Murray's visual puns elide slapstick with palpable threat, while alienation and death stalk her goofy polyps—and the manner in which her raw, ungainly constructions don't just approach us like amiable strangers but crowd us like intimates we may have been trying to avoid. Breaking the decorum of mainstream modernism with her own distinctive brand of grab-you-by-the-collar urgency and improvisatory, implicitly anarchistic joie de vivre, Murray has

taken many risks to make her art, and in the process has fundamentally altered the rules of the game. For those who have not lost their appetite for painting, her gamble has paid off in manifold ways, with more to come not only from Murray but from other artists who seize upon the new spaces she has opened to them.

Robert Storr, Rosalie Solow Professor of Modern Art,
The Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

6. *Wishing for the Farm*. 1991. Oil on canvas, 8'11" x 9'6" x 13" (271.8 x 289.6 x 33 cm). Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York. Photo: Geoffrey Clements, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
7. *Do the Dance*. 2005. Oil on canvas, 9'5" x 11'3" x 1'1/2" (287 x 342.9 x 3.8 cm). Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York. Photo: David Allison, New York

PUBLICATIONS

Elizabeth Murray
Robert Storr

Elizabeth Murray has radically altered the structure of modernist painting. Her shaped and constructed canvases, often topologically modeled in three dimensions or fitted together out of multiple jigsawlike parts, treat figure and ground in unprecedented ways, giving the elastic shapes of classic Surrealism a space in their own image.

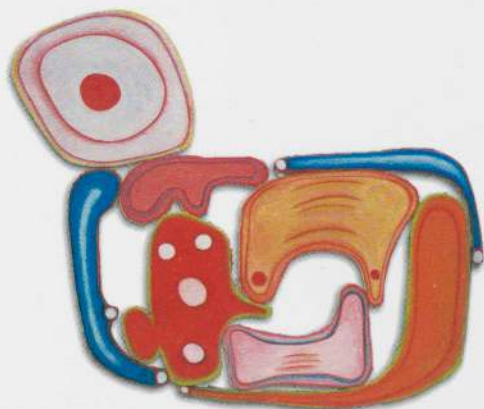
This book accompanies the most detailed examination of Murray's art yet mounted, showing its development from Pop-oriented reliefs in the 1960s to the extraordinary volumetric formats of her recent work. The book features an expansive essay by Robert Storr, exploring Murray's relation to artists such as Paul Cézanne, Stuart Davis, Willem de Kooning, Claes Oldenburg, and Frank Stella and to the New Image paintings and Neo-Expressionism of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as to graffiti artists of the same period. Also featured are an interview with the artist and a full-color plate section of seventy-five of Murray's paintings and drawings.

9.5 x 11; 220 pages; 150 color illustrations
493. hardcover \$55.00; members \$49.50

Popped Art
Elizabeth Murray

To accompany the full-scale publication accompanying Elizabeth Murray's retrospective, the Museum is also producing a matching artist's book. Since Murray's art often operates in three dimensions, this book contains two pop-ups derived from her work, one from a painting of 1984, the other from a recent lithograph. Both pop-ups are designed by the accomplished paper engineer Bruce Foster in collaboration with the artist. The book also shows a selection of the preparatory sketches and other drawings that Murray makes to create these works. Robert Storr, organizer of the Murray retrospective, contributes an introduction.

9.5 x 11; 32 pages, 2 pop-ups, illustrated throughout.
495. hardcover \$19.95; members \$17.75



8.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Gallery Talk

Monday, October 24, 2005
6:00 P.M.

Robert Storr, organizer of the exhibition and Rosalie Solow Professor of Modern Art, The Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, leads a discussion about the exhibition in the Museum galleries, after-hours. The group meets in the Film lobby, located to the east of the main Museum entrance.

Artists Panel

Monday, November 21, 2005
6:00 P.M.
Titus Theater 2

Contemporary artists, including Jennifer Bartlett, Carroll Dunham, Robert Gober, and Jessica Stockholder discuss the impact of Elizabeth Murray's work in a panel discussion moderated by Robert Storr.

Critics Panel

Monday, November 28, 2005
6:00 P.M.
Titus Theater 2

Critics and scholars, including Carter Ratcliff, Katy Siegel, Joan Simon, and Alexi Worth discuss Elizabeth Murray's work through individual presentations and a discussion moderated by Robert Storr.

Tickets are \$10, \$8 for members, \$5 for students and seniors, and can be purchased in the Main Lobby of the Museum and at the Film and Media Desk. Tickets are also available online at www.ticketweb.com.

For more information on Public Programs, please call (212) 708-9781 or (212) 247-1230 (TTY), or visit www.moma.org/momalearning.

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