

# **Elizabeth Murray, modern women : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 20-August 22, 1995**

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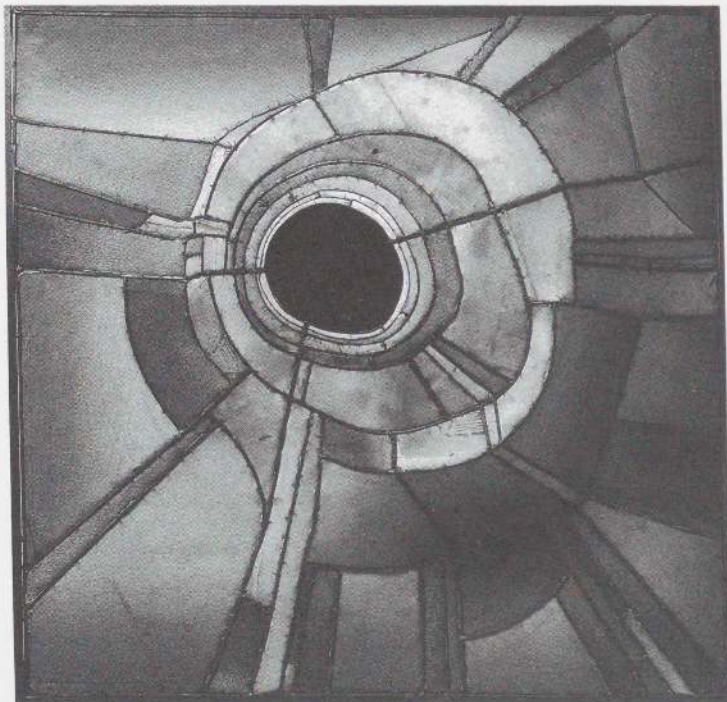
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primary documents, installation views, and an  
index of participating artists.

ARTIST'S CHOICE

# Elizabeth Murray

MODERN WOMEN



The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
June 20–August 22, 1995

THE ARTIST'S CHOICE SERIES IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A GENEROUS  
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## FOREWORD

This is the fifth in a series of "Artist's Choice" exhibitions which began in 1989. Though each of the exhibitions has been as different as the work of the artists who selected them—the late Scott Burton, Ellsworth Kelly, Chuck Close, and John Baldessari—the basic principles have always been the same: to see the collection of The Museum of Modern Art in a fresh way, outside the normal patterns of chronological installation, departmental divisions, and curatorial thinking; and, in parallel, to gain insight into the way contemporary artists draw inspiration from the work of their predecessors. Up to now, each of the exhibitions has emphasized in one way or another the internal languages of art—cutting across boundaries of date or scale or medium, for example, to relate works by their formal order (Kelly), their codes of representation in a single motif (Close), or the unexpected hybridization of their fragments (Baldessari). Elizabeth Murray's gender-specific selection takes us into different territory, opening onto the sociological histories of modern art and of this Museum, and embracing unresolved debates about the interplay of biological and societal factors in an individual's creativity.

Modern art's history is closely intertwined with histories of democratizing social reform, and the freedoms and tolerances pushed for by avant-garde artists have often been seen as test cases for the larger prerogatives of the individual in modern society. Only in rare and isolated instances in early modern art, however, has this general push to "liberation" been accompanied by a specific emphasis on equality of opportunity for women artists. Moreover, a dominant proportion of dealers, museum personnel, and critics who have shaped our traditional understanding of the purposes and progress of innovation in the visual arts has been male. For individual female artists today seeking roots or forebears in the kind of chron-

icle this Museum's collection presents, there will inevitably be gaps and disproportions that beg questions.

Murray's installation shows us familiar works in unfamiliar contexts and juxtapositions, and brings to light countless lesser-known pieces that have only infrequently been on view for the Museum's visitors. The question of commonalities, of shared spirit or character across boundaries of chronology, imagery, and medium are very much at issue, and Murray has grouped the works in such a way as to bring these matters to the fore. The exhibition is on one level, then, a dialogue between a fixed, leveling principle—all women, only women—and a more flexible, visual, and intuitive set of groupings determined by the individual artists and works themselves. Thinking leads to looking and looking back to thinking, seamlessly, just as matters of aesthetics and politics reverberate against each other in the selection and the installation.

The "Artist's Choice" series emphasizes that modern art advances, not through constant traditions or grand teleologies of principle, but through individual questioning maneuvers that constantly reorder art history to suit the needs of creativity. In these individual remakings of ancestry, questions of form, identity, and larger social politics tend to be inseparable; and Murray's personal questioning of the role of gender in creativity, as well as in the codifications of history, is a timely insistence on the incompleteness, and remaining room for expansion, of the premises of social reform and creative self-realization that have been among the most compelling appeals of modern experimentation in art.

Kirk Varnedoe  
Chief Curator  
Department of Painting and Sculpture

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Elizabeth Murray

The idea for this show—to select women artists from the Museum's collection—was the first and only idea I had. Maybe it was less an idea than an inevitable choice. I had misgivings, though. First of all, I do not like to have my work "ghetto-ized" and have avoided being in shows of only women. I know many artists who feel the same. Also, because my choices were defined by the Museum's collection, there are some major historical gaps in my survey. I went ahead in spite of these worries, because I wanted to explore what being a woman in the art world has meant. In a way, it has meant being an outsider; and having (in the past at least) to overcome many cultural barriers to gain acceptance as an artist—or even to be able to do one's work at all. I wanted to see if this perspective, of having been on the outside, gives women's art a particular look, or psychic vantage point. I had to ask: What is there to be gained by separating women out and doing a gender-specific show? I kept telling myself I did not want the show to be political—and felt very uncomfortable that the show could be so interpreted. But I realized soon enough that it is political, and that looking at this work, assembled together, was a way for me to confront headlong questions I have pondered for some time.

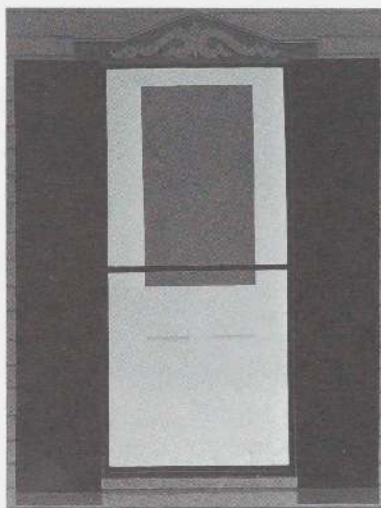
Many questions recurred to me as the show took form: Is there a difference in look, in feel, in approach, in spirit, between men's work and women's work? Do men hammer their ideas through more resolutely, more directly, more satisfyingly—and would that make their work better? Which rais-

es the "quality" issue. (This was a word I heard often in the early 1970s, as women were gaining a stronger presence, and particularly in reference to the distinctly feminist work of Miriam Shapiro or Judy Chicago.) Is there a kind of "psychic search" peculiar to the feminine? A subjectivity, a way of looking inward, that is embodied in our work almost like a biological imperative?

Having watched both boys and girls grow from infancy, I have been shocked at how their artwork and play reflect what child psychologists tell us about gender. Boys do build upward and out with blocks, while girls develop interior spaces. Girls do draw pictures of elaborately dressed princesses and brides and boys draw rocket ships blasting into space. Is this the unconscious base we who develop into artists emerge from? How do we extend our art past our cultural gender definitions? In this show I think much of the strongest work starts with gender and then breaks free and goes beyond. These

are women who left home to find out who they were in the world through their art-making.

At first I thought I might restrict the show to the women artists of the 1940s through the 1960s. When I was in art school in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I knew of only a few women artists and had no women role models. All my heroes were men, and I learned to paint by running upstairs at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and looking at the de Kooning painting *Excavation*. Sometime in my fourth year



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Lake George Window*. 1929.  
Oil on canvas, 40 x 30".  
Acquired through the Richard D. Brixey Bequest





Marisol. *The Family*. 1962.  
Painted wood, 6' 10 1/4" x 65 1/2" x 15 1/2".  
Advisory Committee Fund

there, I saw a reproduction of Grace Hartigan's painting *The Wedding*, and was impressed by the strength of her touch and the vitality and confidence I felt in the work. She was as good as the guys, I thought. Soon after, I saw a Lee Bontecou sculpture in the flesh. It absolutely blew me away. I had never seen such aggressive physicality and vulnerability at the same time. I became aware of Pop Art, and saw a work by Marisol; her open self-inflected use of the erotic struck me as the first time I had seen an artist be so candid. I was so politically naive at the time that the words "sexism" and "feminism" were not yet in my vocabulary, but I definitely took note that these artists were women, that their art was in the mainstream, and that they took themselves seriously.

When I came to New York City in 1967, one of the first shows I saw was of Nancy Graves's camels. I made friends with Jenny Snider, Jan Hashey, and Louise Fishman, and I had already met Jennifer Bartlett a few years before. These were the first women I knew personally whose desire and ambition matched my own, and I've included in this exhibition examples of the work we were doing at the time.

The work I've selected is varied and covers a broad range of ideas and psychic states. In planning the installation of the show, I grouped things not strictly chronologically, but generically, by look and feel; and the show fell into clusters around certain artists, or around strongest exemplars, which felt like the right focus. Joan Mitchell, Grace Hartigan, and Helen Frankenthaler, for example, are all artists for whom the paint itself, and its exotic potential, is uppermost. With some of these artists there is a kind of sub-text of image: I put Bontecou in this group because of the way her image emerges from her material, even if there is a psychological probing that separates her work from theirs. But whether I thought of the plan chronologically or generically, some pieces, even by the same artists, were hard to place. Georgia O'Keeffe, for instance, has different looks to her practice of art—there is the sensual and organic, and there is the hard-edged. So I put O'Keeffe in two different places: close to Hartigan because I see a connection there and also among the Minimalists.

Frida Kahlo, Louise Nevelson, Marisol, and Louise Bourgeois are placed together in another group, because their work deals openly with sexuality and with intense self-exploration.



Nancy Graves. *Notebook*. 1970.  
Mixed media, 11 x 8 1/2".  
Acquired with matching funds from  
the National Endowment for the Arts  
and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd



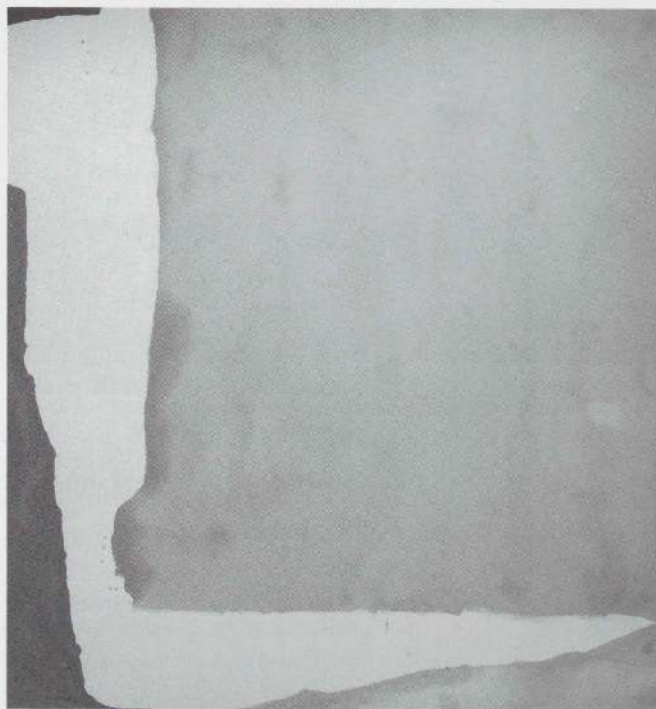
Joan Mitchell, *Grand Carrieres*.  
1961-62.

Oil on canvas, 78 1/4 x 117".  
Gift of the Estate of Joan Mitchell  
Photo: Phillips/Schwab, courtesy of  
Robert Miller Gallery

Below:  
Helen Frankenthaler.  
*Mauve District*. 1966.  
Synthetic polymer paint on  
unprimed canvas, 8'7" x 7'11".  
Mrs. Donald B. Straus



Grace Hartigan, *Shinnecock Canal*. 1957.  
Oil on canvas, 7'6 1/2" x 6'4".  
Gift of James Thrall Soby



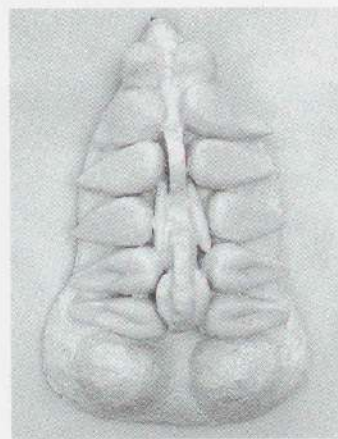




Louise Nevelson. *Sky Cathedral*. 1958.  
Assemblage: wood construction painted black, 11'3½" x 10'¼" x 18".  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ben Mildwoff



Frida Kahlo.  
*Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*. 1940.  
Oil on canvas, 15½ x 11".  
Gift of Edgar Kaufmann, Jr.



Louise Bourgeois. *Torso: Self Portrait*. 1963–64.  
Plaster, 24½ x 16 x 7¼".  
Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Slifka Fund

Nevelson is the most formal, but looking at *Sky Cathedral* I hear Mick Jagger's raucous "Paint It Black" and think of a dark nursery. Kahlo's intensity is all-encompassing and in some paintings almost unbearable. It is her completely flawless

technique that reveals her meanings, that allows us to bear it. I think of these artists as the hot ones. Agnes Martin, Bridget Riley, Chryssa, and Mary Bauermeister are cooler, more distant, but still soulful and subjective. Martin is refined in her

brand of spirituality. Riley and Chryssa are tougher, more calculating—and obsessive.

One of my many discoveries while organizing this exhibiton was Anne Ryan, whose work I had not known. Ryan, who raised three children on her own and supported her family by running small restaurants in Greenwich Village, started collaging when she was fifty-four, after seeing a Kurt Schwitters show. Each piece of hers seems like a poem to me; if I were to compare her to anyone it would be Emily Dickinson, because of her centered and thoughtful abstract language. As for disappointments, I would have loved to include Florene Stettheimer's works, which are hard to categorize. The Museum has a good Stettheimer collection, but the pictures I wanted are out on loan at this time. I considered using photography, too: perhaps because it was a developing field, women have had a greater presence in photography than painting, and the Museum has a great collection. It was only the restriction of space for the installation that made me decide to leave out the photos and use only painting and sculpture.

Basically, the key things in terms of content, that have determined how I've installed the work, are painterly concerns, obsessivity of means or techniques, and the erotic, spiritual, or conceptual underlying purposes I felt in the work. It was not my aim—although there are many powerful works here—to have this presentation rest on the success or failure of individual works. Instead, I wanted to weave these works together to provide a sense that women's work has made, gradually at first, and then more and more, a genuine and profound contribution to the art of our time and to the shape of art to come. Stepping back from the show I see for the first time that it is hard to imagine the art of the last half-century without certain of these artists. And though there are many relationships and connections that I've tried to make apparent in the installation, I find it impossible to make any broad generalizations about this work; inclusivity seems to be the only applicable general term, since these works tap into so many different ideas of art-making.

Clearly, there are changes and differences within the history my selection presents. The works in the show seem to gain a kind of momentum in the 1940s and 1950s, when one can feel women becoming more confident and comfortable in their role as artists. After 1970 there arrive dozens of women artists who have fully entered the mainstream, and whose work has enormous influence. Yet, without much fanfare or attention, those earlier women—from Suzanne Valadon to Berthe Morisot to Grace Hartigan—got their art out into the world. This show is an affirmation of their efforts. I want to thank all the artists in the show—not just for myself, but for everyone. Each one of them has opened the door into art-making a little further for us to walk through—they have widened our consciousness of what art can be, and who can be an artist, a real artist.

Special thanks from Elizabeth Murray to: Victoria Garvin, Administrator and Assistant to the Chief Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture; Kathleen Curry, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings; Peter Galassi, Chief Curator, Department of Photography; and Lynn Zelevansky, Associate Curator, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and formerly Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture.

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### **Elizabeth Murray**

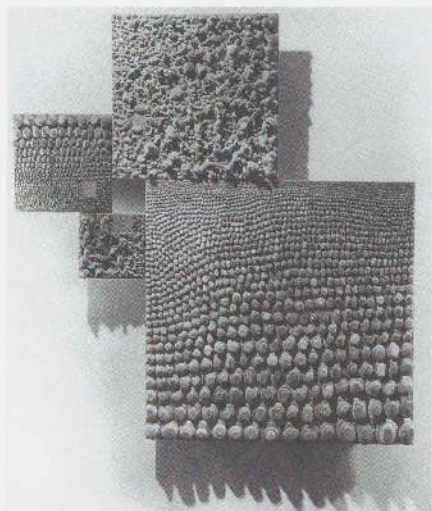
Born 1940, Chicago, Illinois

Art Institute of Chicago, B.F.A., 1962

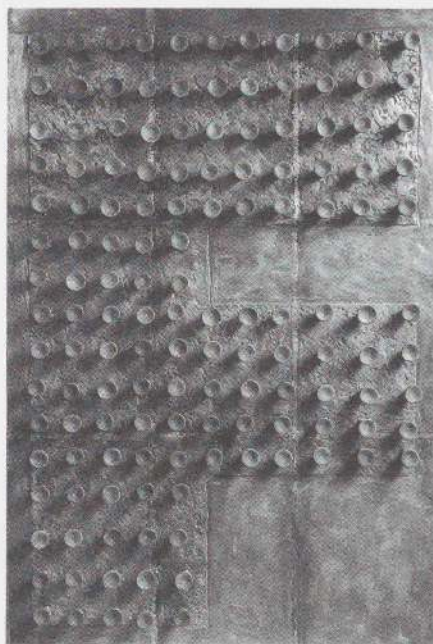
Mills College, Oakland, California, M.F.A., 1964

Lives in New York City

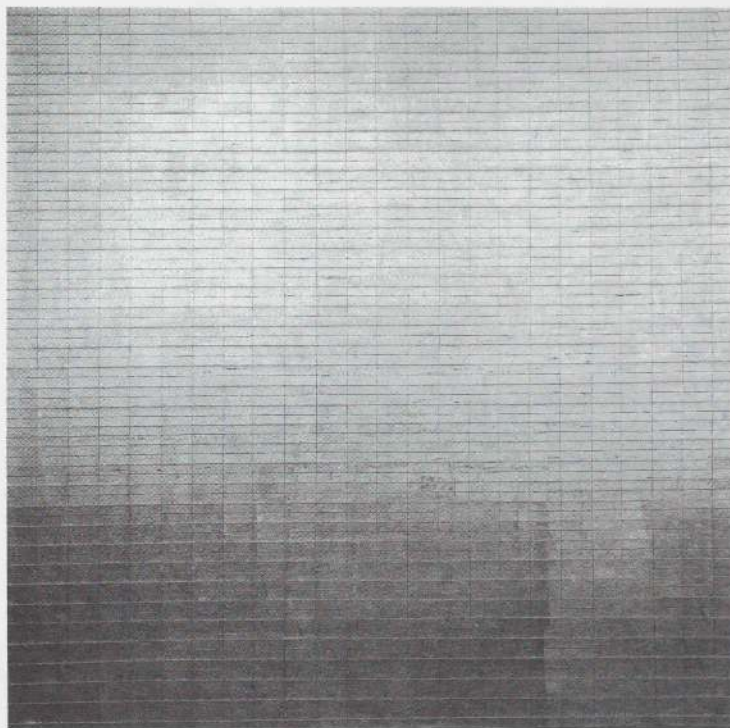




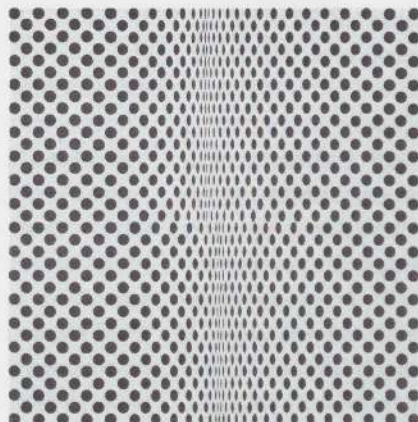
Mary Bauermeister. *Progressions*. 1963.  
Pebbles and sand on four plywood panels,  $51\frac{1}{4} \times 47\frac{3}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{2}$ ".  
Matthew T. Mellon Foundation Fund



Chryssa. *Projection Letter F*. 1958–60.  
Welded and cast aluminum relief,  $68\frac{3}{4} \times 46\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{2}$ ".  
Ruth Vollmer Bequest



Agnes Martin. *Friendship*. 1963.  
Incised oil-gilt gesso on canvas,  $6'3" \times 6'3"$ . Fractional gift of Celeste and Armand P. Bartos



Bridget Riley. *Fission*. 1963.  
Tempera on composition board,  $35 \times 34"$ .  
Gift of Philip Johnson

All works illustrated are Collection,  
The Museum of Modern Art,  
New York.

Cover:  
Lee Bontecou. Untitled. 1959.  
Relief construction of welded steel,  
wire, and cloth,  $58\frac{1}{4} \times 58\frac{1}{4} \times 17\frac{1}{2}"$ .  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Arnold H.  
Maremont