

Elizabeth Murray



November 4 - December 13, 2008

UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY

somewhere else completely

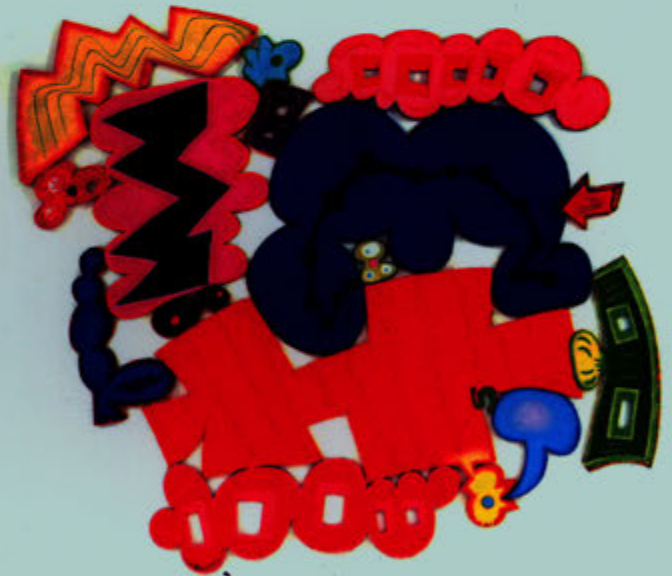
by Francine Prose

The four walls of the rectangle cannot possibly contain an art that exists on, explores, and explodes so many different borders. Looking at Elizabeth Murray's work, you feel that all those extrusions and protrusions, splashes and bubbles, stalks and diamonds and handles projecting into space, all those empty gaps carved out to create more edges *inside* the painting are not so much the reasoned product of an aesthetic or choice but rather of a necessity, of an obsessive desire to create new boundaries to approach, to straddle and bravely cross.

These exuberant paintings compel us—with the lightest touch, as if we are being gently but firmly prodded with one of their finger-like forms—to confront and reexamine the most profound demarcations: between the comical and the horrific, the earthy and the transcendent, the ego and the id, the idyll and the nightmare, the child and the adult, the recognizable and the unnameable, the instinctive and the cerebral, the natural and the artificial, the visionary and the reportorial, the idea and the execution. To say nothing of that border that's almost too terrifying to mention—the big one, between life and death, being and nonexistence.

Elizabeth Murray's art reminds us of, insists upon, and celebrates the joys of living in the world, the satisfactions of color and form, of work and dreams, the sheer pleasure a painter takes in playing with paint. And yet it never lets us forget how easy it would be to shut our eyes for a heartbeat, to drop our guard for an instant—and to go spinning into free-fall off the edge of the planet.

Looking at Elizabeth Murray's work, I find myself drawn to that interface between the animate and the inanimate, the mysterious and the mundane—a border that (as in an animated cartoon) rapidly transforms itself into a road that I can



Bop, 2002-2003

Oil on canvas

9'10" x 10'10-1/2" (299.7 cm x 331.5 cm)

Collection of Milly and Arne Glimcher

Photograph by Ellen Page Wilson, courtesy PaceWildenstein

© Elizabeth Murray, courtesy PaceWildenstein

travel back to my earliest and most inchoate experience of art. For one of the tricks at which art excels—the sleight-of-hand that Elizabeth Murray so deftly performs—is to operate on our consciousness like a sort of protracted *déjà vu*, allowing us to grasp at and then lose, to nearly recover and then surrender, some long-lost, buried memory or chimerical sensation that eludes us, skirting the edges of our peripheral vision, vanishing like a vivid dream at the moment of awakening.

Over the years, I've come to understand that what Elizabeth Murray's paintings evoke for me are the childhood hours I spent delighting in the golden age of children's entertainment, those final decades before the grown-ups decided that kids had to be saved from their own desire to be scared out of their wits. I've never forgotten the anxious giddiness with which I followed the adventures of Koko the Clown, the perils of Betty Boop, watched Farmer Gray chase his deeply alarming mice across our ten-inch TV screen. But only now, as I look at Elizabeth Murray's work, can I summon a sense of what it must have been like to see all that shape-shifting and metamorphosis, to observe the stunning ease with which household objects learned to walk and talk—to see it before I was old enough to know precisely how much of what I was seeing was possible, or *real*.



Abraham, 2006

Gouache and watercolor pen on collaged paper on foam
42" x 52-1/2" x 1" (106.7 cm x 82.6 cm x 2.5 cm)

Estate of Elizabeth Murray, courtesy PaceWildenstein

Photograph by Kerry Ryan McFate, courtesy PaceWildenstein

© Elizabeth Murray, courtesy PaceWildenstein

I was an infant when we got a television set. At that point, my observational experience of the world was too narrow and limited for me to know, or much care, if a clown could materialize out of a bottle of ink, or if the engine of a train could turn into a giant, predatory mouth, ready and eager to swallow whatever was loitering on the tracks. For all I knew about palm trees, they bent and swayed and sang hula songs

along with an invisible ukulele; for all I knew about adult emotion, huge drops of water flung themselves off the grown-ups' foreheads when they were anxious or perplexed. I could have been that North African neighbor Paul Bowles describes—the man who goes to see his first film, which happens to be *The Ten Commandments*, and leaves the theater horrified, convinced that Cairo has been destroyed. For both that Moroccan and myself, there was, I am sure, something powerful and ineffably strange about that innocent confusion. The limits of the visible world have never been and will never again be stretched so widely, never permitted to accommodate so much mystery and wonder.

Never, that is, until I became acquainted with Elizabeth Murray's paintings, which—perhaps because they embody suggestions of cartoonishness but are more elemental, less narrative and complex, more elusive and allusive than cartoons—recreate for me that state of pure receptivity, of unblinking consciousness, the visceral chill-down-the-spine of recognizing everything I saw with absolute conviction and at the same time not knowing in the slightest what in the world I was seeing. Which is, of course, part of what art does, what art *is*: it resonates with the familiar and at the same time resists every attempt to explain or describe or reduce it. Perhaps

that's why, in interviews, Elizabeth Murray demurs when asked what exactly she had in mind at the start—or the end—of a painting. For always, what's most interesting about a painting or novel or poem has occurred in that interval after the initial impulse is overruled or forgotten, and a new imperative takes over, conveyed by the sort of celestial dictation that the artist takes and that makes a work of art appear to have a life of its own.

In fact, so much life has been compressed into Elizabeth Murray's art



Shack, 1994

Three-dimensional lithograph in 20 colors on Rives BFK with Saunders backing sheet
Assembled to 65" x 51" x 2" (160.02 cm x 129.54 cm x 5.08 cm)
Publisher's seal embossed center right, Edition 60
Courtesy Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE), Bay Shore, NY
Photograph courtesy ULAE
© Elizabeth Murray, courtesy ULAE

that it's stating the obvious to remark that the effect is eruptive. Her images seem not merely rebellious but caged, confined against their will: forces struggling to escape from the bounds of the painting. Possibly that's why it's so hard to imagine the work at an earlier state—to believe that the vibrant form before us was ever a blank, featureless construct of stretchers and bare canvas. Elizabeth Murray's work is indelibly marked with her hand, her signature, her personality, and yet she manages to make the mind and hand of the artist disappear into something that appears to have given birth to itself, and to have always existed.

In a smarter and wiser, more hip and sophisticated world than our own, we would never need to address a subject that inevitably seems to arise in relation to Elizabeth Murray's work—that is, the whole issue of the domestic. A more intelligent world would know that *domestic* is a perfectly neutral word, universal in its significance, since all of us live—or have at one time lived—in households, or at least houses. *Domestic* can be, and often is, used in a harmless, nonperjorative way—for example, when we remark that domestic objects have regularly and consistently appeared in the work of such geniuses as Velázquez, Vermeer, Cézanne.



Blue Cloud, 2002
 Watercolor on paper
 15-3/8" x 21-1/2" (39.1 cm x 54.6 cm)
 Collection of Douglas Baxter
 Photograph by Kerry Ryan McFate, courtesy PaceWildenstein
 © Elizabeth Murray, courtesy PaceWildenstein

The problem (the intermittently squeaky wheel that demands our attention) is when *domestic* is used as codespeak to mean *feminine* or *female*, which is further codespeak for *weak* and *second-rate*. That the word might be used this way is an especial danger when the maker of domestic images happens to be an actual female. All this seems especially puzzling and illogical in regard to Elizabeth Murray. Because if *domestic* is being used to mean trivial, mild, humble, predictable, timid—that is, more codespeak for female—Elizabeth Murray's paintings certainly aren't *that*. On the shallowest level, the domestic objects in her painting are a great deal more pro-active and even ferocious than

their ceramic counterparts in many Old Master paintings. No sensible person would pour hot coffee into one of Elizabeth Murray's cups, or stuff a T-shirt into the bureau drawers already spitting their contents back. Meanwhile, it takes great courage (a word that this use of *domestic* does not associate with the domestic, that is, the female) for a female artist to avoid self-censorship if what burbles up from the id happens to be coffee cups and bureau drawers—in other words, *domestic* images, in the sense of *art lite*.

In fact, Elizabeth Murray's paintings are anything but lightweight. Far from being humble and timid, they're—given her very particular balance of image and abstraction—confrontational and even pushy in the way they force you against yet another border, a tough demarcation often misidentified as one of gender, or sociology, when in fact that division has more to do with temperament, consciousness, and metaphysics.

That is the separation between those who can lose themselves in idea, in pure form and abstraction, and those who—like Orpheus, like Lot's wife—are sooner or later moved to look back over their shoulders at the raucous and precious world. It is again too simple to say that this division breaks down along the lines of male and female, domestic and hunter-

gatherer, since there are men and women in both groups, great abstractors from Thomas Aquinas to Agnes Martin, and those to whom household objects sing their siren song: Manet, Philip Guston.

Of course, fewer women have the option, the luxury of choosing which group they want to belong to, particularly when they have children, whose very real and pressing needs



Untitled, 2005
Gouache on paper
8-7/8" x 11-7/16" (22.5 cm x 29.1 cm)
Estate of Elizabeth Murray, courtesy PaceWildenstein
Photograph by Ellen Labenski, courtesy PaceWildenstein
© Elizabeth Murray, courtesy PaceWildenstein

often make it harder to focus exclusively on the far horizon. But is it better to fixate on the abstract and airy than on the here and now; or is it, in fact, more admirable and difficult to cultivate the sort of double vision that allows us to keep watch over both frontiers at once?

In any case, Elizabeth Murray's work insists on its right *not* to shrink itself into categories and limits, not to fit itself into a realm that filters out the wondrous detritus of human life, our coffee cups and shoes. Because the (one would think) self-evident fact that the domestic *is* the world is something that, until recently, art has effortlessly understood, but which (briefly, we can only hope) it lately seems to have forgotten.

The bold, innovative new paintings take these tensions and reconciliations even further. They invite us to look at the most recent work, and then back at the earlier images, and to track the ways in which these resolutely nonrepresentational paintings plainly show us how the world has changed over the last several decades. Like the culture in which we live, the new works have grown more urgent, more fragmented, unstable, fragile and vertiginous. Such paintings suggest that we might as well be Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, at the very moment—or the very moment before—Aunt Em's house is picked up and carried away by the swirling cyclone.

Yet here is the ultimate paradox: looking at Elizabeth Murray's work provides so much interest and pleasure that it helps us forget the increasingly dangerous circles in which we seem to be spinning. Jittering,



Kind of Blue, 2004
Oil on canvas on wood
9' x 11' x 2" (274.3 cm x 335.3 cm x 5.08 cm)
Collection of Candace King Weir Foundation
Photograph by Ellen Labenski, courtesy PaceWildenstein
© Elizabeth Murray, courtesy PaceWildenstein

exploding, jumping on or off the walls, her paintings still find the time and space to extend a hand and help us over the most important boundary that art can lead us across—that is, the border between being here, confined in our bodies and minds, and being set free from all of that: being somewhere else completely.

The novelist Francine Prose was a longtime personal friend of the artist.

This essay originally appeared in "Elizabeth Murray: Paintings 1999-2003," PaceWildenstein, New York, 2003.



Acknowledgements

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I also want to express my appreciation to members of the Staller Center for the Arts staff: Joe Esser, Pat Moran, Pete Pantaleo, and Christian Routh, for exhibition assistance; Meghan Adamo, Jeannie Cahill, Eunah Cho, and Amy Rhee, Gallery Interns; Diane Heekyung Ahn, Kristen Boddy, Allison Conley, Sophia Dang, Matthew Flewelling, Jin Kang Park, Alison Schumejda, and Lauren Williams, Gallery Assistants; Liz Silver, Staller Center Production Manager, Liz Lamendola, Technical Director, and the Staller Center Technical Crew for exhibition lighting; Amanda Meyers Wasserman, Staller Center Director of Development, for Gallery fundraising; and Barbara Schimmenti, Gallery Secretary.

I respectfully dedicate this exhibition to the memory of Elizabeth Murray.

Rhonda Cooper
Gallery Director

Catalogue design: Karsten Grumstrup

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Cover Image:

Morning is Breaking, 2006
Oil on canvas on wood
9'2-1/2" x 10'1" x 2-1/2" (280.7 cm x 307.3 cm x 6.4 cm)
Estate of Elizabeth Murray, courtesy PaceWildenstein
Photograph by Ellen Labenski, courtesy PaceWildenstein
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