

ELIZABETH MURRAY

NEW WORK

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OF MODERN ART

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RECENT WORK BY YOUNGER

AND ESTABLISHED ARTISTS

An Interview with Graham W. J. Beal,
 Chief Curator, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
 New York, 10 May 1988

GB—The earliest painting in this show, as we're planning it, is *L'Amour (For Panic D.J.)* of 1986.

EM—The configuration of the painting is three question marks which are tangled around each other. We had to build one of the marks and then twine the other ones around it. They're built in wood and then canvas is stretched over them. Before, we built the shapes and jammed them together. Then when I had the thing ready to paint, one of the challenges was to paint on such a bumpy surface because the shape actually comes out from the wall. Also, there isn't much substantial to paint on, so it was really taking a lot of negativity in making it positive.

GB—Had you worked anything out in drawing before?

EM—Yes, there are some small notes that I did for this. I've been using exclamation point shapes . . . I had used comma shapes too, but to me the question mark is probably the most charged.

GB—More charged than exclamation points?

EM—The exclamation point is also a demand. With the question mark there's an openness and that feels very meaningful to me in terms of how I feel about painting. It's always like searching for resolution even though ultimately I believe that there is and isn't resolution at the same time. There is resolution in the finality of the object and yet within the painting I don't think anything is really resolved.

GB—I remember being surprised, on first seeing your work, discovering a teacup in what I had taken to be an abstract painting.

EM—That's sort of what I want to happen. And now, because people expect to find the images, they look for them and the images get conjured up. I don't know if I like that.

GB—Is it making you play hard to get?

EM—I do, you know. One responds to responses—it doesn't make me want to be more secretive but it makes me think more about what I want. On the other hand, somewhere in me, I think, lurks the pure abstract painter. And yet, I can never stay with it—it's not possible for me. I always find myself wanting to find the image and yet keep it broken at the same time. I don't want it to be the same thing that the painting is representing. If the painting represents the image, then to me it's dead on the wall.

GB—So, you are in a dualistic frame of mind when you approach painting.

EM—For me, in every painting there's an essential conflict: the image and not the image—to paint or not to paint. It is beginning to get more clear to me what these things are, what the shapes are . . .

GB—Is that good?

EM—I think it is good, and I used to think that the less you knew and the more you went on in an unconscious creative state, the better it was. Now I understand that you can never know enough because the things you know are just things that you get to go into deeper. But I also think that the shapes are like masks or armor that represent my own fears and my desires. I think that what I try to do is to penetrate what I don't want to know. Maybe that's too psychological, but I really think that painting is about trying to get to what you don't know about. You use various devices and with these shapes and images I've found the kind of devices I can use—play with, almost like blocks—to find formations for things I really don't know about myself. I think that's how painting works for



This Pair (For H.T.), 1987

people who look at it too. It's a process of discovery. Sometimes you like it, sometimes you don't.

GB—You don't like it because of what it reveals? You're not talking about aesthetics?

EM—It's so hard for me to separate out aesthetics—for me it's all wrapped up together:

GB—I suppose I'm really talking about your sense of falling short in a work, as opposed to seeing something that actually carries conviction, but which, when you see it, you don't like.

EM—If I feel it carries conviction, then I can deal with not liking it because . . . it's something I've done that's new.

GB—Is it something you just can't alter? You don't like it but there's not much you can do about it?

EM—There's always a level where you're willing to settle and say, "Oh, it's O.K., it's too hard to go on—I can't stand it." But the next day you realize you *can't* settle for that, so you scrape it off, and get busy with it again. To me, it's that very process of finally doing something that I haven't really done or felt before that's important. Of course, I'm not saying it's all totally unfamiliar, because it's not. I don't know—in terms of painting—if I'll ever do something that's totally unfamiliar to me again. But it *does* feel like I've stretched my capacity to make the paint work in a certain way and that I'm seeing something I haven't quite seen before. *That's* when something becomes finished. But that's what I mean about starting out with a mask that you're forcing open. Some people call it "problem-solving."

GB—Many artists used to talk about "problem-solving" as a way to avoid discussing what they were really doing. I have some sympathy for that.

EM—I do too. It's hard to talk about what you you're really doing.

GB—Talking about problem-solving, how do you deal with the tyranny of starting something? Is it an issue for you?

EM—Sometimes I work on the shapes, it's a way to keep on painting in a world that's constantly saying painting is dead. It certainly

keeps me interested in painting. When you have these things to work on, it's incredibly challenging. I create a situation that makes me think, "Hmmm . . . how am I ever going to paint on that, or what can I do now, how can I make this work as a painting?" The shapes become a kind of arena in which to continue painting.

GB— But you design the shapes in the first place . . .

EM— Yes, I do the whole thing. In a way, designing a shape is the part I hate most. I love it when I make little drawings for them and come up with a thousand ideas for different kinds of shapes, but then I have to draw them out. I hate that part of it, because I have to realize it and it can't be fantasy anymore . . .

GB— Are you saying that you're setting yourself up?

EM— Exactly, so I do it as quickly as I possibly can and let it sit around for a day before I start marking it up and making plans for how to build it. Then I do a clay model for it, which I also hate doing.

GB— And this is all monochromatic?

EM— Yes, they're like dress patterns . . . models.

GB— At what point does color go into your work?

EM— It usually starts to get clear in the middle of the painting. With *L'Amour (For Panic D.J.)* I don't think I had any desire for a particular color. Sometimes I really want a certain color. I could start with it and then change, change back again or go in a totally different direction. Sometimes I have no idea at all. With this painting I don't think I did, but at some point I put the Indian Red in then began to work in this blue-green around the edges. It became clear to me at a certain point that I wanted to find a table image but it was very hard to do. I've been working with the tables almost continually and I was thinking there would be some way to break from it and find different kinds of images. I've always found that shapes call for an image and belie it at the same time— undercut it. Part of using these rolled together question marks was to find something else, but I didn't. I kept seeing the table legs twisting around each other so finally I let it happen, and then once the image becomes clear, the color more or less follows along.

GB— *True Air* is made of a T, R, and a Y. How did you decide to give yourself the problem of painting the word TRY?

EM— I did the word WHY because I wanted to do *Why Painting*, and then by rhyming I did TRY and the third one is going to be DIE.

GB— It seems quite a departure from previous work.

EM— I had become involved with the shoe paintings, like *This Pair*, where I had been putting holes in the canvases so that the wall is included. It's as if the painting gets sucked into the wall. Then I became interested in seeing the insides of these things—they became more three-dimensional and full of symbolism. *This Pair* is also like a heart, the leg is the aorta.

GB— Looking at *True Air*, I wondered what Duchamp and Picabia meant to you.

EM— I've always loved Picabia, because I think he's such a funny painter.

GB— Such a bad painter?

EM— Yes, he is bad, but he gets it to work, he doesn't even force it. Duchamp always claimed that he wasn't interested in painting but he was actually pretty good. I mean the *Nude Descending a Staircase* is a more than competent painting. There is some care there. That kind of wickedness— sexual wickedness— is something that fascinates me. It certainly exists in my recent work— not as a goal, but as part of the flavor.

GB— So, in *True Air* these elements refer to organic plumbing: intestines, arteries, and so on?

EM— Yes. Hollowing out is really interesting to me now. It's symbolic for seeing inside oneself and in that sense I guess it's easy to

read. But, of course, they are paintings and when you cut out a portion of them what you really have is the wall.

GB—What about the title for *L'Amour (For Panic D.J.)*?

EM—*For Panic D.J.* is about Bob Holman—he does a performance called “Panic D.J.” And I was listening to Carmen—the “l’amour” aria—and realized how beautiful it was. Anyway, because the table is ripping, the painting seemed somehow wrenching, about love and panic. Actually it’s the first tripping table image. Now I realize that I was trying to make it have a wholeness totally different than it had with the three entwined shapes. That’s the thing: getting them to work on both levels, where the paint makes sense and the shape makes sense. In *True Air* what I did was to take more cloth, overlap it across the shapes and disguise the letters. There’s a dress image.

GB—Is it a figure?

EM—Well, not so much a figure, more a hollow dress. It was going to be a tree. I wanted to make tree paintings for a long time. I just haven’t been able to do it. I’ve done the drawings and somehow when I start painting it never happens. Basically when I had the idea for *True Air* I made the vertical shape for a tree image of some kind. It’s tough to paint a tree, it really is, it doesn’t come easily. It’s one thing for Susan Rothenberg, and it’s another thing for me so the tree began to turn into a dress. Then the painting got very emotional for me and very maternal. I don’t think I was thinking so much of myself as my own parents or my mother, but it’s too strange for me to talk about.

GB—Much of your work is organic, but this one seems particularly so.

EM—Having the structure of the letters keeps my feet on the ground. It’s a control that lets me go off the handle on one side—a formal base for the whole thing to come out of. I like that.

GB—The formal side?

EM—Yes.

GB—Have you had to put up with comparisons to Frank Stella very much?

EM—Yes, I have and I’ve come to hate it.

GB—Why?

EM—It used to come up with every talk I gave. When I was first doing shapes I could understand it up to a point. Now I feel that my work has so little to do with his that it surprises me. I find it upsetting, because it’s a way of trying to submerge what I’m doing into some sort of . . .

GB— . . . historical pattern?

EM—Exactly, I guess everyone has to do that, but to me it’s very different.

GB—At first sight, your work comes across as—for want of a better term—classic American abstraction, but you don’t have to get into it for very long before that notion is seriously subverted. You are literally poking holes in pure formalism.

EM—Yes, yes, that definitely is part of the way I think.

GB—In *This Pair (For H.T.)* I can see only one shoe . . .

EM—When I started it I was going to make a pair of shoes. I was going to paint a shoe image on top of a shoe shape. Once I started to get into the painting I realized that image was already there and that’s exactly what I’ve been avoiding: not letting the shape become the image. I can’t exactly explain why it scared me into leaving the shape alone, but that’s what I did. I planned to call it *Despair* but decided that it was too much and picked *This Pair*.

GB—And H.T.?

EM—H.T. is Helen Tworkov, a friend of mine and a writer who told me a story that gave me the idea for *This Pair*.

GB—Was *Despair* just too heavy?

EM—It was. I decided I’d save it, for when I really need it.

ELIZABETH MURRAY

Born in Chicago, Illinois, 1940

Lives and works in New York City

EDUCATION

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

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

CHECKLIST

L'Amour (For Panic D.J.), 1986

oil on six canvases

101½ x 85 x 30½" (257.8 x 215.9 x 77.5 cm)

Collection of Ernie and Lynn Mieger, San Francisco

Slip Away, 1986

oil on canvas

129½ x 101½ x 9" (328.9 x 257.8 x 22.9 cm)

Private Collection, New York

This Pair (For H.T.), 1987

oil on canvas

116 x 85 x 29" (294.6 x 215.9 x 73.7 cm)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Harry W. Anderson, Atherton, California

Untitled, 1987

charcoal and pastel on fourteen sheets of paper

46¾ x 51½" (118.8 x 130.8 cm)

Collection of Paul and Sheri Siegel, San Francisco

Blink, 1988

oil on canvas

90 x 95½ x 19½" (228.6 x 242.6 x 49.5 cm)

Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Descending Heel, 1988

oil on canvas

126 x 78 x 24" (320.0 x 198.1 x 61.0 cm)

Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1988

pastel and eraser on seven sheets of paper

45¾ x 30½ x 2¼" (116.2 x 77.5 x 5.7 cm)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Harry W. Anderson, Atherton, California

Elizabeth Murray's work has been exhibited and published extensively. For a detailed biography and bibliography, see *Elizabeth Murray: Paintings and Drawings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987).

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Photograph by James Dee