



Elizabeth Murray

Sept. 12 - Oct. 22, 1993

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

When Objects Become Events

The art of Elizabeth Murray is infused with the spirit of two seemingly incompatible models: cartoons and Cezanne. Although Murray attended art school to study commercial illustration, having been drawn to cartooning since an early age, she experienced what might be called a “conversion” in front of a Cezanne at the Art Institute of Chicago, and decided to become a painter. Aspiring artists often jettison their first crushes in favor of their new love of art, but not, happily, Murray. She is not the type to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Her work has, over the years, exhibited an ever-increasing complexity as she continues to explore the formal inventiveness found in both these sources, while also drawing emotional sustenance from them.

One of Cezanne’s primary concerns was to preserve the sense of solidity of objects in the world under circumstances of inevitable change and movement over time. His struggle was to describe, in paint, in a single image, an apple at its reddest and crispest as well as that same apple as it turns brown and shrivels while waiting for its portrait to be painted. This process led to pictorial distortions and peculiar shifts in perspective. The perceptual flux Cezanne sought to describe transformed objects into sequences of discrete forms, as they bend, break and then reform – the well-known tipping table tops whose edges don’t match up. By the end of his life, in the watercolors, abstract patches of color go into focus as foliage and then dissolve back into isolated blocks of paint, ever grouping and regrouping.

In a similar, but greatly exaggerated fashion, animated cartoons exploit an object’s capacity for distortion and transformation – albeit with a whimsy absent in Cezanne. Wile E Coyote can, in a matter of seconds, go from a full-bodied figure to flat as a pancake and then snap back whole and three-dimensional. In Max and David Fleischer’s cartoon series *Out of the Inkwell*, figures jump out of the abstract blob of ink into distinct characters – or are pursued by the artists’ eraser, which seeks to obliterate them. If a swatch of paint can be either rock, tree or arm, then is it such a leap to Felix the Cat, whose black, cylindrical



Flesh Table, 1986, 102" x 86" x 34", oil on four canvases, Courtesy private collection, New York

tail can become a telescope?

This notion that integral objects can be reconfigured in new ways, and, through formal rhyming, become entirely new, fictive objects, lies at the heart of Murray’s art. Like Cezanne and the best early animators, Murray uses those things we know from everyday life as jumping-off places for her inventions: tables, cups, spoons. Simplicity of subject is required when the content is the transformation of objects into events. It is required so that objects retain their basic identities even after the most violent reconstruction and exaggeration. A baby howling for its bottle may seem to have a mouth 10 times the size of its actual face, but we still recognize the baby. A hungry dog may swallow a cat whole and end up with a huge, bloated

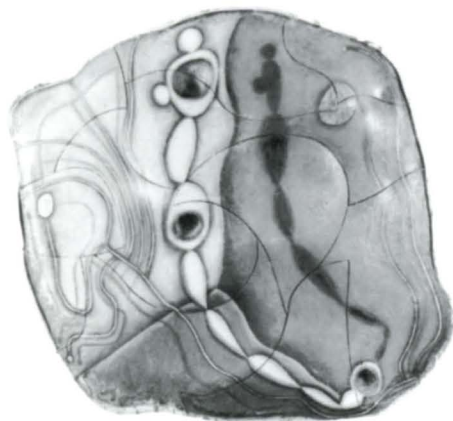
midsection, but we do not lose sight of the dog, no matter how grotesque the distortion.

What obsessed Cezanne was the problem of perspectival scale: the disjunction between what we know and what we see — how we see it. An apple in our hand appears one size, but sitting away from us on a table, appears smaller, which we know it is not. Things we know are very large, such as mountains, appear small in the distance. How can an artist reconcile this discrepancy; can it be reconciled? How does an artist do justice both to immensity and distance? The traditional method is to employ a scale contrast, to position, for example, a small human figure in the foreground of a vast landscape to measure, in relation to our own bodies, the

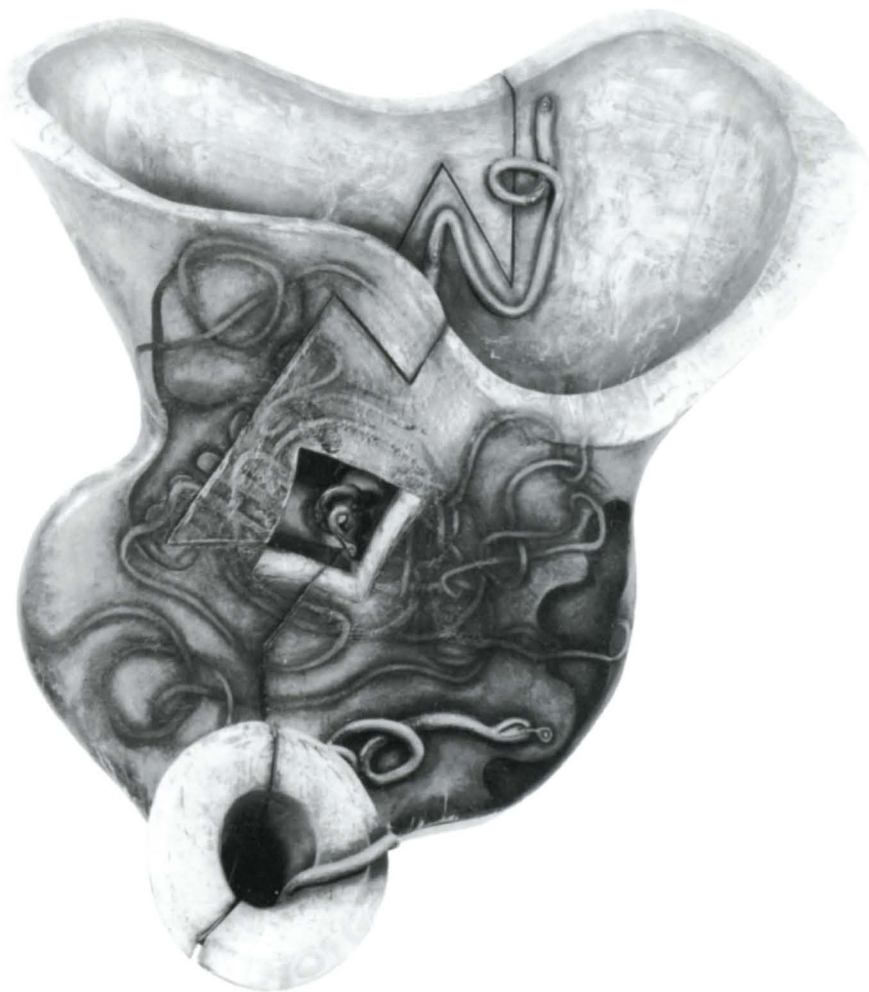
vastness of nature. Cartoons employ scale discrepancy for comic effect: small insects grow huge, a predator's mouth gapes as wide as a door to trap his prey, Porky's arm stretches out into the distance like taffy to grab hold of Daffy's neck.

When Murray paints a table, it comes forward toward us, top first, as if we were birds flying over it. It can seem as big as the roof over a house. For children, whose view of the world is marked by their own reduced scale, a table can be an imaginary shelter or a mountain cave. Cartoons are devised from the child's point of view, not only because children are the intended audience, but because "adult" size is already for them abnormally large. The scale of a coffee cup falling off a table top can seem increasingly distorted to a child on the floor as the cup approaches both the floor and disaster. That cup can also appear to be flying through the air on its own. In Murray's art, the inanimate objects take on animate movements, as if propelled by unseen forces, like wind through a curtain.

The "animation" signals a break from the everyday order of the world, and, in Murray's universe, creation itself is understood to be impossible without some fundamental fissure. Creation is a dividing, a breaking, a separating – whether the microscopic division of a cell, the separation of a child from its mother at birth and the severing of the umbilical cord or, for artists, the necessary departure of the body of work from the creator's private intentions. The body of work, like children, takes on its own



Wishing for the Farm, 1991, oil on canvas, 107 1/8" x 114 5/8" x 13 1/2", Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



Labyrinth, 1989, oil on canvas, 106 1/2" x 99 1/2" x 27", Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

identity. Murray's work is suffused with the primary scene of the first parting, the initial steps toward autonomy: a world of divergent zigzags; fragmented surfaces; split, cut and sliced tubes; truncated vessels and cords. Her own Cezannesque obsession is how to be true to the distinct identity of objects without losing their interconnectedness to the things around them. Such a scenario is suggested in *Wishing for the Farm*, where Murray conceives a figure, anxiously drooping in a corner, an elongated series of sausage shapes, joints squeezed, with oversized nose, ear and mouth (the "holes" in our heads), and attached tenuously to a projected shadow. How is our shadow related to our sense of our body, with its flesh and weight and color? Is the shadow part of us or something alien? What is the connection? What belongs to us and what does not?

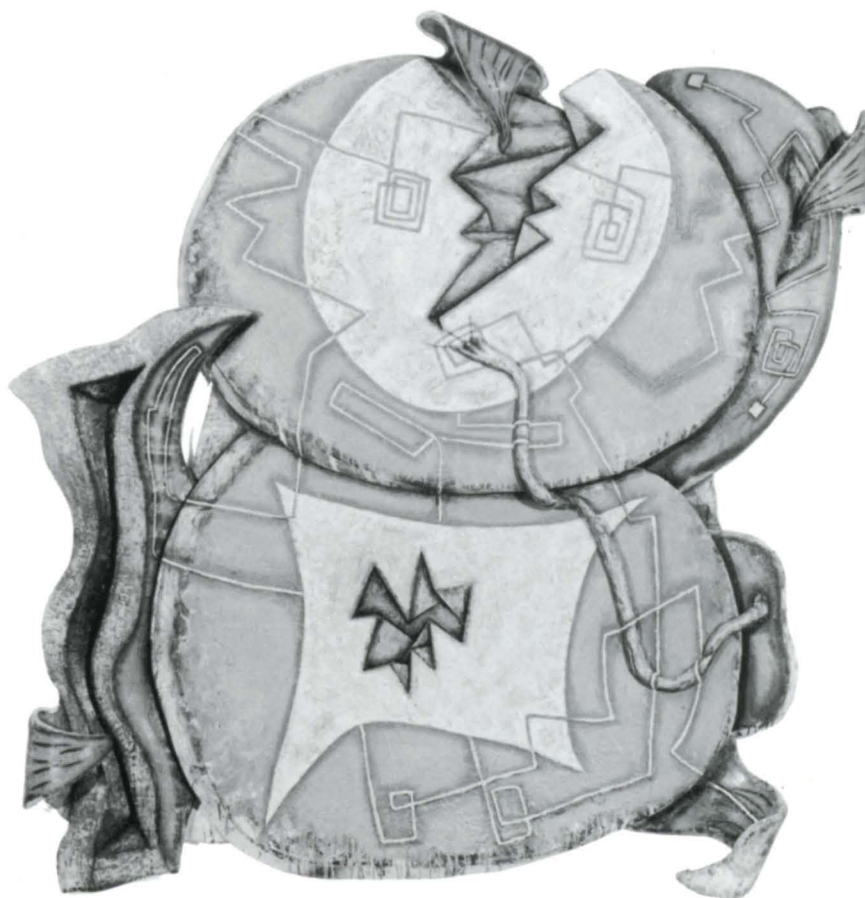
The odd, overall shapes of Murray's paintings have the same volatile form as the objects she depicts. They seem to be bursting out of their skins, bulging and molting, like children growing out of their shoes. These gawky forms break out from the space of painting into our "real" world, but continually retreat and rewind back into their own. At the edges there is an ambiguous blur, as if the painting were fading out, vanishing as it approached the "real" wall. This unfinish around the periphery argues that painting – like life – cannot be finalized, for that would mean an end to transformation and growth and a cessation of our capacity for change.

Even though the subject matter of Murray's art inhabits the domestic world, its psychological tenor is not sunny or innocent. It has a dark coloration, like a dense forest. Her implied narratives are full of pitfalls, knotty loops and sudden

cul-de-sacs over a dangerous terrain. Cartoons, like fairy tales, may be created for children, but they are invented by adults who know that children are not only bored by, but reject stories bereft of conflict and tension – reject them as untrue to life. The delight we take in the surprising transformation can be both comic and frightening. Picasso said of Cezanne that we prized him for his “anxiety” – for the insecurity he felt in the face of impending, inevitable change. Think of a taciturn, tethered dog who suddenly jumps out at you and bares his teeth in a vicious growl. Think of Murray’s *Flesh Table*, with its top torn asunder even as it wraps its legs around itself in an embrace. Or is the embrace a strangulation? This cut-up, squished, squashed, chewed-up world of dark, hidden recesses conceals figures that may jump out and go “Boo!”

Murray’s art elicits in adults all those primal, childhood confusions of comic fear that are primitive, preverbal responses to the twists and turns of an imagined unknown. There is more, the paintings say, than any grown-up, logical view of the world. There are feelings and fantasies we can never escape.

— Jeff Perrone, New York



Sandpaper Fate, 1992-1993, oil on canvas, 104" x 102" x 10",
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Gene Locks, Philadelphia

Acknowledgments

We are most grateful to Elizabeth Murray for her work and for her assistance with this exhibition.

Paula Cooper, Natasha Sigmund and Liz Boyle of the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, are owed special thanks for their contributions to the exhibit.

In addition, we are indebted to Jeff Perrone for his fine essay written with insight and wit.

Finally, the Jules and Doris Stein Foundation, Los Angeles, and Marti and Tony Oppenheimer, Kansas City, have our deepest appreciation for their generous support of the exhibition.

Bruce Hartman, director
JCCC Gallery of Art

Cover: *Table Turning*, 1982-83,
oil on two canvases, 106 1/4" x 100 1/2",
courtesy the artist. Photo: Geoffrey Clements

Johnson County Community College
Cultural Education Center
12345 College Blvd. Overland Park, KS
66210-1299

Exhibition Checklist

Quake Shoe, 1992-93

oil on canvas

72 5/8" x 42" x 9"

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Irwin Engelman,
Westport, Conn.

Untitled, 1990

pastel, charcoal and cardboard on paper

48" x 31 1/2" x 1/4"

Private collection, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Untitled, 1981

charcoal, pastel on paper

61 3/4" x 46"

Collection Paula Cooper, New York

Table Turning, 1982-83

oil on canvas

106 1/4" x 100 1/2"

Collection the artist, New York

Untitled, 1985

pastel on two sheets of paper

42 1/4" x 63"

Collection Clara A. Feltzin,
East Hills, N.Y.

Untitled, 1985

pastel on two sheets of paper

47" x 52 1/4"

Collection Robert and Gayle Greenhill,
Greenwich, Conn.

Flesh Table, 1986

102" x 86" x 34"

oil on four canvases

Courtesy private collection, New York

Slip Away, 1986

oil on canvas

129 1/2" x 101 1/2" x 9"

Courtesy private collection, New York

Labyrinth, 1989

oil on canvas

106 1/2" x 99 1/2" x 27"

Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery,
New York

Wishing for the Farm, 1991

oil on canvas

107 1/8" x 114 5/8" x 13 1/2"

Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Sandpaper Fate, 1992-1993

oil on canvas

104" x 102" x 10"

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Gene Locks,
Philadelphia

Untitled, 1992

pastel on collaged paper

56" x 22 3/8"

Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York