

HYPERALLERGIC

Catherine Murphy's Challenge

By John Yau – 31 March 2013



An installation view of "Catherine Murphy: Recent Work" at Peter Freeman, Inc., showing the "Knots" paintings (2009)

1.

This is Catherine Murphy's first exhibition with Peter Freeman — and the inaugural show of the gallery's large, new space (March 14–April 27, 2013). Although Murphy has been showing regularly in New York since the early '70s, this is the first time that she has had a space big enough to comfortably display her work, a multi-panel work like "Knots" (2009), a suite of 15 modestly scaled paintings, along with more than a dozen paintings and drawings, with the largest painting ranging six feet in height or width. I felt like the work finally had space to breathe.

In the main gallery, surrounded by her paintings and drawings, I was struck once again by Murphy's complete avoidance of the tropes we associate with observational painting. There are no still lifes, landscapes, or nudes in the exhibition, and no variations on a theme. This isn't the only thing that distinguishes her work from artists such as Philip Pearlstein, Rackstraw Downes, Vija Celmins and Sylvia Plimack-Mangold — in whose company she belongs — but it is something that should be pointed out, and even stressed, if only for the various factors it suggests.

First, Murphy works outside the received expectations of what an observational artist should paint, presenting a challenge that has yet to be fully acknowledged, much less celebrated (all the artists I previously cited have had retrospectives and monographs). Second, her paintings and drawings form two distinct bodies within her oeuvre, disparate approaches that, when taken together, add up to something breathtaking. This is not to say that all her works are equally successful, but the ones that are rise so far above whatever else is being done by others, particularly in terms of observational art, it got me wondering about what could be standing in the way of Murphy receiving the attention she deserves.



Catherine Murphy, "Rose's Coloring Book" (2011), graphite on paper, paper: 27 x 34 inches, drawing: 25 x 25 inches

I believe the answer lies in Murphy's choice of subject matter. In this show, there are graphite drawings of a box of half-eaten chocolates; a used coloring book; a bad 19th century landscape painting in a gilt frame; a broken umbrella. And there are paintings of an empty, shallow box (most likely for a dress) surrounded by tissue paper; a blue dress with white polka dots draped on a bed; a cut-out paper snowflake taped to a window at night; the paint-spattered floor of the artist's studio. These are ubiquitous things that we ignore, throw away, and don't care much about, particularly if we are at all cool and sophisticated. In that sense they are different from "ready-mades" — citations from the mass media, pop culture, advertising, or art history — because they come without an aura of art about them.

There is not a trace of irony in Murphy's work. The subjects she paints and draws are things we distance from ourselves as we move up in class, become educated, learn there is a bigger world than what we knew. Warhol tried covering his tracks, because he was ashamed of his origins (self-hatred, which he had plenty of, is a great motivation to become a social climber). What does it say about us that we adulate social climbers and seldom appreciate artists who aren't ashamed of where they come from?

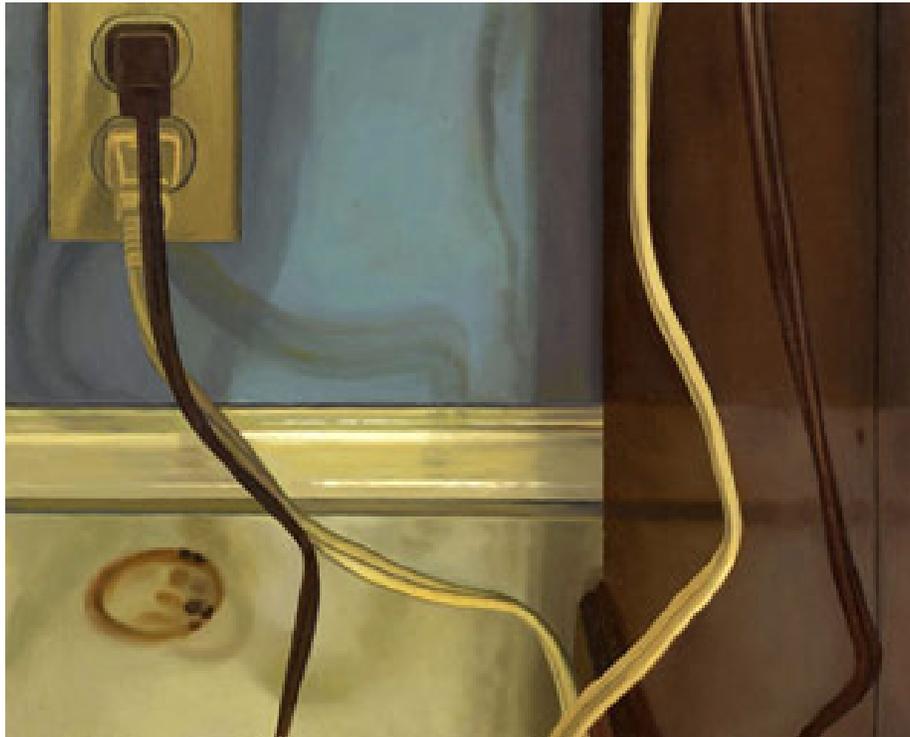
Also, Murphy's subjects aren't chosen in any obvious, thematic way. Because of this, you can never get a signature Murphy, which is a bad move in a world obsessed with brands and signs of taste.

The challenge that Murphy presents is one the art world has avoided addressing since at least the 1980s, because to do so would entail a willingness to be self-critical. By the unspoken conventions governing the art market, Murphy does everything wrong. She works outside the box enclosing observational painting. She picks subjects that challenge her abilities, which means she doesn't give herself a chance to settle into a style. Her subjects remind us of things that we'd rather ignore or forget, like mortality and vulnerability. She maintains rigorous standards in everything she does (she is the one contemporary artist who is closest to Piet Mondrian, in this regard). These are just a few of the many reasons why she is a major artist deserving of a museum show.

2.

In various public talks that I have heard Murphy give over the years — most recently, on March 12th, 2013, at the New York Studio School, in conversation with Roger White — she has said that some of her paintings come from dreams, and that she discovers her subjects. By this, I imagine she

means that she “sees” her paintings and drawings, one by one, and then she makes them, however long it might take her. This requires that she sets up an equivalent to the situation she “sees,” giving herself something to work from. The things Murphy “sees” are not particularly noticeable, at least until she comes along.



Catherine Murphy, “Knot 1” (2008), oil on canvas on board, 16 x 19 7/8 inches

By “seeing,” I mean that she finds a way to absorb the subject into an abstract format that does not deny the thing’s essential character. A box of chocolates from above becomes an irregular grid that is either half full or half empty, depending on your disposition. A stretched umbrella, its ribs reaching toward the paper’s edges, is a circle trying to fit into too large a square. Murphy turned both subjects into black-and-white drawings so that we could better see what she was getting at. For one thing, there is no center; the half-empty box and the broken umbrella underscore the entropy endemic in all systems, and that there is no center. Murphy knowingly chose not to paint delicious-looking, rich brown chocolates because that would have distracted us. She isn’t in the entertainment business. Instead, she made drawings in which there are no contour lines, which places her in company with Georges Seurat, Edwin Dickinson and Jasper Johns.

3.

Murphy doesn't generalize, doesn't develop shorthand for her subjects, doesn't use paint in any way that announces painterliness or style. Rather, she does something far more difficult and demanding — she remains devoted to her subject, however plain and ordinary. And if the subject requires that Murphy paint layers of flesh-colored tissue paper or flakes of falling snow seen through a window on a windy night, then she will take up the challenge. Think of all the artists who become content to produce examples of their brand with just the right little twist. There is none of that in this exhibition. Every painting and drawing is distinct, no variations.

4.



Catherine Murphy, "Knot 3" (2009), oil on canvas on board, 18 x 24 inches

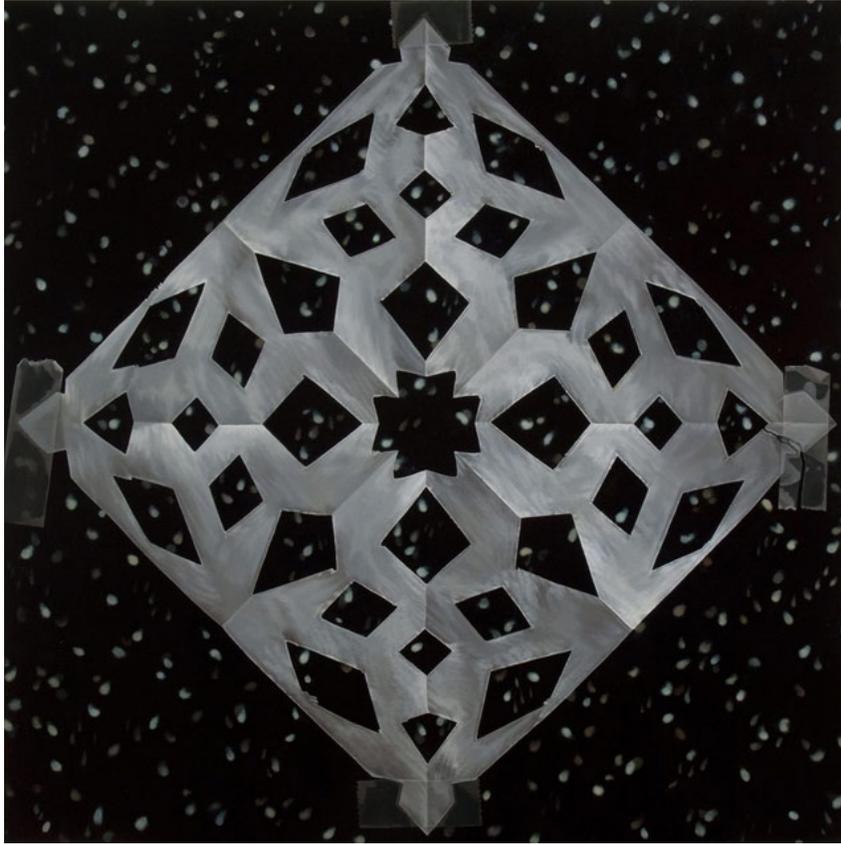
"Knots" (2009) is a subversive tour de force project comprised of fifteen paintings of the same subject, the knots and imperfections in the wood that house paint cannot permanently cover over. Each painting offers a close-up view of one more or more knots bleeding (or blistering) through the house paint. It's as if we are going through the house, assessing all the imperfections, all the

things that have become an annoying disturbance. The knots might be on the baseboard beside a doorway, on the ceiling made of pine boards, on the wall by a window. No amount of paint will cover over this imperfection.

Some of the views are so smart and sharp — beside a slice of a mirror reflecting a partially open door; echoing the full moon glimpsed through the trees outside. In this painting Murphy also positions the moon low in the window, defying our expectations, with the knot hole near the top edge of the window frame. Our attention rises from the perfection of the full moon to the blemish of the knot.

There are so many analogies that this suite generates. I don't think I am alone in pointing out that Murphy's subjects — and the "Knots," in particular — call to mind Jasper Johns's reason for painting "flags" and "targets": "[they] were both things — which are seen and not looked at, not examined." Like Johns, Murphy is interested in things that haven't been examined — an empty box or a knothole peering through a layer of paint — haven't really been thought about. At the core of Murphy's choices is a philosophical consideration of painting (art) and its relationship to both reality (passing time and constant change) and society (a machine of consumption and waste that is out of control).

Has painting become a shallow, empty box surrounded by torn tissue paper? Is it a surface/window looking onto a depthless black space in which there is no sanctuary, as "Snowflakes (dedicated to Joyce Robins)" (2011) suggests? Is it a paint-splattered surface, a dirty floor walked on by others? In counterpoint to these questions, Murphy focused on something else in "Knots." A wall marred by knothole suggests that there is no perfect place for a painting to be mounted, that the very structures we use to house and display works of art are flawed down to their base. Instead of being defeated by this knowledge, she embraces it. There is nothing charming about "Knots" because she wants to give you something more than false reassurance.



Catherine Murphy, "Snowflakes" (2011), oil on canvas, 52 x 52 inches

The only things we see through the window of "Snowflakes (dedicated to Joyce Robins)" are snowflakes, abstract daubs dissolving into the surrounding blackness. On the window the artist has "taped" a geometric snowflake cut from folded paper. We are the one (the unique object) on the brink of becoming the many (another form losing its body as it joins the others). In the face of such devastating awareness, Murphy continues to paint and draw, continues to "see" without lowering her standards. Her belief and determination are marks of greatness.