

ARTFORUM

Catherine Murphy

By Jason Farago – April 2013



Catherine Murphy, *Snowflake*, 2012, oil on canvas, 52 x 52"

For too long now, critics and curators have segregated realist figurative art from the contemporary mainstream, as if representation were proof in itself of naïveté or belatedness. If anyone can shatter that ahistorical parochialism it's Catherine Murphy, whose first New York exhibition in five years displays such sophistication and perplexity that it destroys all prejudices about the ambitions of mimetic art. A longtime senior critic at Yale University School of Art, Murphy spends months if not years on each painting or drawing and yet, despite the painstaking method of facture, her art has never been a showcase for skill. Rather, it is a charged system in which the smallest details -the wrinkles in a dress draped over a bedside, or the ribs of a broken umbrella sticking through stretched nylon- give rise to the grandest questions of phenomenology and of being in the world.

Murphy does not work from photographs. Instead, she compresses infinite acts of perception into a single tableau that captures the passage of time via unfamiliar emphases and off-kilter scale -such as in *Coming or Going*, 2010, a tall, thin Hudson Valley landscape with a fawn in the foreground that overwhelms the lower half of the canvas. Seemingly anodyne imagery can take on awesome significance. In another example, two square-format paintings depict diamond-shaped paper snowflakes taped to a window, each one taking up exactly half the area of the canvas. In *Snowflakes*, 2011, the night air outside is filled with snow, while in *Snowflake*, 2012, the sun shines through pine needles.

Reality and image, fixity and change, nature and civilization, the singular and the countless, the painting as window and the painting as object: all of these dualities end up crashing upon one another in an irresistible relay of moments just beyond language or reason. This complexity tempts me to invoke the lineage of abstraction or conceptualism, but Catherine Murphy confirms that realist painting doesn't require any outside defense to stand at the forefront of contemporary art.