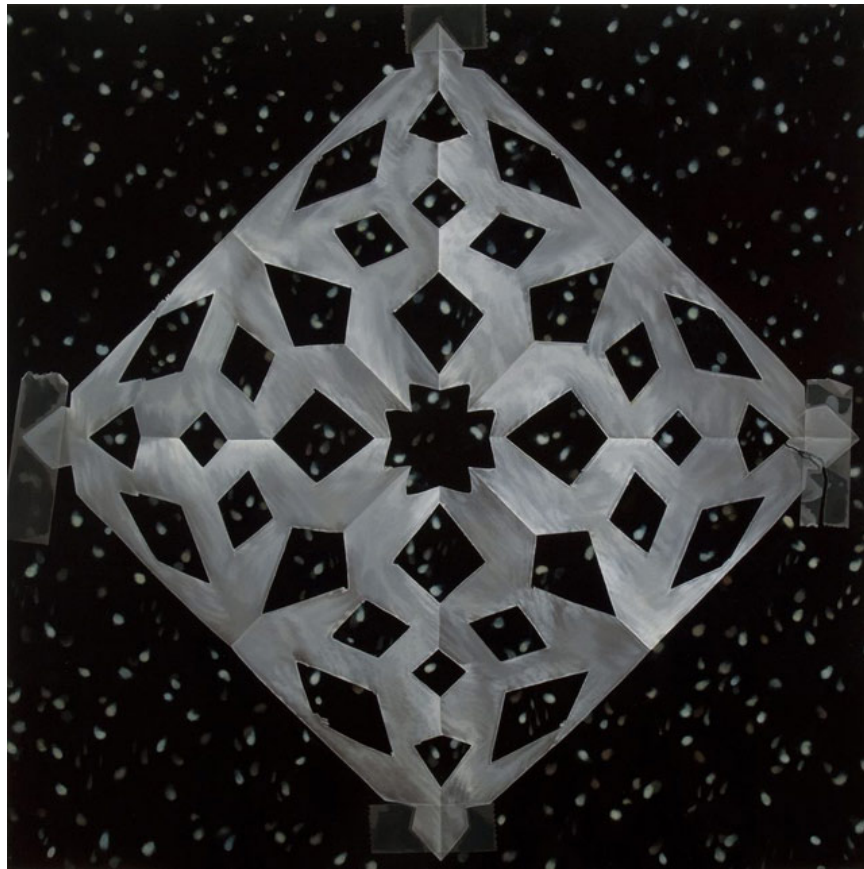


HYPERALLERGIC

Single Point Perspective: Catherine Murphy's Perfect Storm

By John Yau – 28 April 2013



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

1.

Stylistically innovative painters outnumber those who have reassessed the accepted conventions of painting. For the most part, artists engaged with issues of style accept certain conventions, particularly regarding spatiality, while those who reevaluate painting find ways to undo assumptions and received tropes. Catherine Murphy belongs in the latter group. Her painting, "Snowflakes (for

Joyce Robins)” (2011) is square, a format we associate with high modernist abstraction and artists such as Robert Ryman and Agnes Martin.

Painters who paint from observation don’t usually work on a square, because it is neither vertical nor horizontal, and doesn’t conform to the portrait/landscape dichotomy, making it a very difficult format in which to arrange a composition without it feeling cramped or overly symmetrical. Murphy begins with this contradiction. This paradox is intrinsic to her ongoing reevaluation of observational painting, which many consider an outmoded way of making art, particularly after the rise of photography, computers and other mechanical producers of images. Murphy is an observational painter who does not use photographs as a source. This does not mean she is nostalgic or old fashioned. Quite the contrary, as often in her paintings and drawings Murphy underscores the modernist definition of a painting as a two-dimensional surface, but usually with an engaging twist.

The subject of “Snowflakes (for Joyce Robins)” is a white, cut-paper snowflake that has been taped to a windowpane. The size and shape of the windowpane is synonymous with that of the painting. We do not see any part of the window frame, which is typically what an artist would do in order to let us know that a “window” is there. We only know the window is there only because of the painted “scotch tape” holding the cutout to the glass. This leap of visual imagination conveys Murphy’s belief that a painting — this one, at least — is simultaneously a two-dimensional surface and a transparent plane (or window to see through), rather than being one or the other.

The white paper snowflake is also a square, which the artist has rotated so that it becomes a diamond shape fitted inside a square. Outside it is dark and snow is swirling. There are two levels to the painting — the flat surface on which the snowflake has been “taped” and the depthless night in which a heavy snow is falling.

At 52 x 52 inches, the scale of the painting implies that it is a fiction based on observation, an enlarged vision of a familiar decoration that we made as children and have seen as adults, particularly on the windows of elementary schools. A commonplace art project given to children in kindergarten or the first grade, who are taught that no snowflakes are alike, the snowflake takes on the importance as a signifier of individuality, offering physical proof of our own individuality, because no two will be exactly alike. At the same time, to paraphrase Jasper Johns, the paper snowflakes are something that we have all seen, all looked at, but not examined.

The relationship between the subject matter and the size of the painting is another consideration in Murphy's reevaluation. Instead of accepting the received view that there should be no greater than a one-to-one-relationship between observed subject matter and the size of them as they appear in the painting, she often enlarges the scale. It is not that she is betraying her subject matter, but that she is being true to her vision of a ubiquitous experience. This conjunction of the visionary and the commonplace is one of the underlying features of Murphy's work, from unsightly knotholes to a half-eaten box of chocolates.

The folded and cut snowflake has been affixed to a window with four pieces of scotch tape. We don't see the window, but the taped paper snowflake demonstrates that it is there. The viewer feels the pressure the artist has applied to attach the paper snowflake to the window (picture plane). Part of the scotch tape is transparent, while both ends and edges are opaque in areas.

Someone (presumably a child) has folded a square sheet of paper in half twice to form a smaller square before using a pair of scissors to cut sections of it away. The result is that the same pattern of negative spaces appears in all four quadrants of the paper. Seen as a diamond, it has the same geometric opening on either side of the central axis. At the center of the snowflake is a cross-shaped aperture. The rest of the apertures are diamonds, trapezoids, and parallelograms. From the square window to the paper snowflake to the cutaway sections, the painting evokes a world in which geometry lies inside geometry on one side of the window, a sense of order, however skewed. At the center of this domain is an empty cross (or window) opening onto a snowstorm (disorder).

2.

Made by hand, the paper snowflake reminds us that each of the snowflakes falling outside is unique and that this is also true of everyone who ever took a pair of scissors to a piece of paper. The creased sheet of paper taped to the window evokes tactility — our experience consists of touch and sight, with the former preceding the latter. The edges of the paper snowflake are fixed, suggesting it is a stable thing, while the outdoor snowflakes are blurred strokes in different intensities of white. They are falling to the ground, joining the others, becoming a layer of snow, which will eventually melt. All their individuality will be lost. Metaphorically (and literally) speaking, we can see the paper snowflake as an analog of the individual being on the way to dissipation, that there is an unbreakable bond between the figure and ground, the inside (or surface) and outside (or depth). Murphy has juxtaposed a single artificial snowflake with a glimpse of the infinite number that fall in a snowstorm.

We may start out as unique, but eventually that shall pass and we will join those whose have preceded us.

3.

“Snowflakes (for Joyce Robins)” can be read as an implicit criticism of Vija Celmins’s paintings of “starfields.” This seems perfectly understandable, yet surprising because Murphy’s critical viewpoint has gone largely unnoticed by the art world. Celmins is nearly a decade older than Murphy and an artist whose work she deeply admires. This does not mean, however, that Celmins’ work is sacrosanct, above criticism.

In her “starfield” paintings Celmins uses a photograph as the source, which flattens out space, accepting the modernist injunction regarding the inviolability of painting’s two-dimensional surface. Time has been suspended and her paintings are, in that regard, timeless. The artist has patiently made a black abstract field punctuated by thousands of white dots of different intensities of light. She is gazing at chaos without blinking. It is a tour de force. With monk-like patience, Celmins has devotedly transformed this evidence of time and space into a painting, an object to contemplate and reflect upon, even as she quietly suggests its final dominion over us.

At the same time, the conjunction between the individual and infinite time is presented abstractly through an inherently poetic subject, the flickering, star-filled night sky. Moreover, the subject is one that can only be seen with the aid of a machine. We cannot see the night sky like this, nor can we see the cratered surface of the moon with our naked eye, another of Celmins’ subjects.

What Celmins has done in her “starfield” paintings is contextualize an abstract form, a dot — the smallest particle of visible difference one can encounter in a painting. In order to make “Snowflakes (for Joyce Robins)” and other recent paintings, such as “Polka Dot Dress” (2009) and “Studio Floor” (2011), Murphy had to find a way to recontextualize the dot in a way that is true to her vision. Murphy’s “Polka Dot Dress” is her starfield. Instead of the night sky brimming with stars, she chose an inexpensive polka dot dress as the subject of her attention. By depicting the dress lying on a bed with most of it hanging over the side, Murphy bends a flexible plane at a sharp angle, so that the top of dress extends back in space, turning the bed into a landscape.

In “Studio Floor,” the artist focuses her attention on a section of a paint-spattered studio floor. The white splatters form the perimeter of a square, the negative impression of a painting that had

been primed with gesso and removed. The splatters are various sized dots, with some overlaying others. Instead of the stars and the moon, Murphy picked something literally underfoot, a ubiquitous sight in the life of a painter. Dissipation, the splatters convey, is inevitable. We may be able to shape time, but chaos surrounds us.

In “Snowflakes (for Joyce Robins),” Murphy picks a more commonplace sight. In her juxtaposition of two kinds of snow, artificial and real, we see two manifestations of the individual’s existence, the schematic, crystalline snowflake with fixed contours and the actual falling snowflakes, whose contours dissipate into the surrounding darkness, with the former on its way to being the latter. It is a journey that begins in childhood, as the paper snowflake makes clear. The artist recognizes that all sanctuaries (or promises about transcending time) are false — at least this is what the empty cross-like opening at the center of the snowflake suggests to me.

In this ordinary encounter, with its evocation that each viewer is alone while peering through the window at falling snow, Murphy conveys what it means to live in time. We shall lose all that has made us unique and join the nameless others.