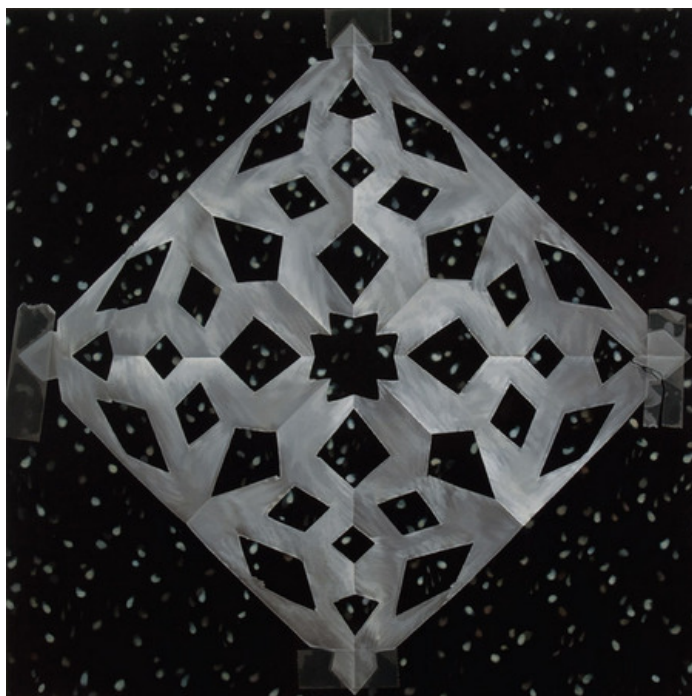


ARTFORUM

Catherine Murphy

By Lisa Turvey – June 2013



Catherine Murphy, *Snowflakes*, 2011, oil on canvas, 52 x 52"

Peter Freeman's new SoHo digs are high-ceilinged and capacious, and this inaugural exhibition of recent paintings and drawings by Catherine Murphy, her first with the gallery, afforded the work ample breathing room. Still, one is never quite sure where to stand or, more precisely, where one stands in an encounter with Murphy's close-cropped, meticulously realist, bigger-than-life renderings of humdrum things and scenes. They admit only to rebuff, aping the usual vantages of perception just to implode under multiple, irreconcilable perspectives, and intimating depth in impossible tandem with attention to surface. Take *Polka Dotted Dress*, 2009, in which the titular object, draped over the end of a bed, is at once parallel and perpendicular to the picture plane, while an insistent frontality gives the lie to depicted recession.

Such perceptual antics, which have grown ever more elaborate in the four decades since Murphy began working, persist throughout. *Studio Floor*, 2011, for instance, replicates the spattered silhouette of where a canvas had lain on an expanse of wood ground, but the outline sits at a slight, incongruous angle to the floorboards, its white drops resting resolutely on the surface and reiterating the shape of the actual support. If photographs of Pollock's studio floor are the easy association here, *Gift Box*, 2013, likewise calls up the attendant midcentury critical hand-wringing about the fate of the easel picture. An image of an open cardboard box ringed by layers of gossamer tissue paper, the painting literalizes the skirmish between illusionistic depth and surface texture or transparency. (It was heartening to realize, on reading some press about the show, that I was not alone in seeing it and thinking of Clement Greenberg.) For all of their painstaking verisimilitude, then -each work is done from life, over the course of months, even years- these so-called observation paintings are animated by the formal preoccupations of the abstractionist: flatness, the boundaries of the edge, internal symmetries, and so on ("I want you to understand about the power of that rectangle," Murphy declared in a 2005 interview). She thus parts company with histories of figuration, maintaining her distance from strict photorealism through manipulations of scale and a refusal of outright trompe l'oeil. Graphite drawings such as *Half Full* or *Sprung*, both 2012, however virtuosic and neutral of affect, would never be mistaken for photographs in the way that kindred depictions by Vija Celmins might.

Murphy operates at the intersection of the two dominant, rarely overlapping trajectories of 1960s art: the legacy of modernist selfreflexivity as it emerged, most significantly, in Minimalism, and the (critically less vaunted) resurgence of representation. To put this in concrete terms, consider a 2008–10 suite of fifteen panels, also on view here, that picture every knothole in the wooden architecture of her upstate home; together, the set partakes equally of Robert Mangold's serial rigor and Sylvia Plimack Mangold's domestic interiors. This synthesis is an indubitable achievement; harder to articulate is why it still seems like a relevant one. Part of the answer involves the sense of a perpetual present brought on by the allover precision of Murphy's likenesses. That one can see every blade of grass in *In the Grass*, 2011, for example, or every strand of hair in *From Behind*, 2009, feels like a cheat on the rhythm and quality of everyday sight. In *Snowflakes*, 2011, among the strongest selections here, the canvas substitutes for a window onto a snowy night sky, onto which a folded-and-cut paper snowflake has been taped. The painting confounds real and represented, exterior and interior, and art and craft to staggering, and ageless, effect—at issue are no less than perception's big questions, which have no expiration date.