

HYPERALLERGIC

Catherine Murphy Sets the Bar Higher and Higher

Murphy shows viewers things they know - a cherry pie or a pile of broken dishes – in ways that are arresting, straightforward, and extremely unsettling.

By John Yau - 20 January 2018



Clasped, 2013, oil on canvas, 46 x 50 inches

My monograph on Catherine Murphy was published in 2016, with a foreword by Svetlana Alpers. Her current exhibition, *Catherine Murphy: Recent Work* at Peter Freeman (January 11 – February 24, 2018), consisting of nine paintings and five drawings, is her first show since the the book was released. Four of the paintings and two of the drawings were reproduced in the monograph, and I wrote about one of the paintings, “Clasped” (2013), at length.

In other words, more than half of the exhibition consists of new work that has not been exhibited before. This is not surprising. Murphy has never been a fast painter, but she has long been an original artist who shows viewers things they know — a cherry pie, or a pile of broken dishes, or a string of floats stretched across a pond — in ways that are arresting, straightforward, and extremely unsettling. In Murphy’s paintings and drawings, the commonplace things of everyday life become analogical: the mind is set loose upon a circumscribed view.



An observational painter who first gained attention in the early 1970s, Murphy never moved away from her realist roots, but in the late 1980s — like Chuck Close, Alex Katz, and Neil Welliver — she enlarged the scale of her canvases. Suddenly, her work was no longer about resemblance, though in some ways it never was. The change in scale lifted Murphy’s work from direct observation to the domain of speculation and inward looking. It became about lucid dreaming, about the continuum between the boundless imagination and physical limitation, and about the border along which one’s consciousness of the visible world becomes disturbed by what is being apprehended, no matter how ordinary it appears. Murphy’s work suggests that nothing is seen neutrally, that the idea of something being neutral and without content is an ideology, at best.

This is what I wrote about “Clasped”:

In the painting *Clasped* (2013), Murphy depicts a close-up view of a woman wearing an ordinary black cloth winter coat and wrinkled black leather gloves, while clutching a black, semicircular, nondescript leather pocketbook.

Later, I wrote:

The woman, whose face we never see and who is, in effect, invisible to us, is wearing pieces of dead skin that fit her hands perfectly, perhaps like a second skin. [...] I see the black gloves, coat, and purse as evidence of the shadows accompanying each of us as we move through a world of light that will soon close behind us.

To cite the last line of Wallace Steven's poem, "The Snow Man," Murphy "beholds/Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."



Painting Drawing Painting, 2017, oil on canvas, 51 x 72 inches

Viewers unfamiliar with Murphy's work are apt to marvel at the way she paints a button, making it feeling sturdy. Murphy does not paint images; she paints things. The red, yellow, green, and gray thumbtacks in the recent "Painting Drawing Painting" (2017) seem as if they could be pried out. It is not that she is a master of verisimilitude; it's that she is able to transform the feel of the thing, whatever it is, into paint.

As the scale of the paintings makes evident, the point is not to fool your eye, but to invite you to reflect upon a given situation, whether it is five stacks of books with yellowing pages, rising from the painting's bottom until they reach the top, as in the square painting, "Stacked" (2017), or a pink inflatable ring floating on a pond, stranded in the lower right corner of the canvas, in "Becalmed" (2017), with weeds growing through the ring's hole.

No matter how benign the subject might initially strike you — and really what could be unsettling about a close-up, overhead view of a cherry pie, whose crust has been partially removed, revealing balls of gooey red cherries clumped together, like blood cells? Murphy's paintings are likely to strike a nerve.



Cherry Pie, 2014, oil on canvas, 38 x 45 1/4 inches, courtesy private collection, New York

One way that Murphy gets past our jaded eyes is through her merging of subject matter with her formal consciousness of the tension between two-dimensionality and illusionism. Other devices she brings to bear include cropping, viewpoint, color, and light — in other words, the whole package: she possesses the acute sensitivity of a great filmmaker working in tandem with the camera person — the lit glass of milk that Cary Grant carries up the shadowy grand staircase to Joan Fontaine in Alfred Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941). And no musical score is needed to accentuate the considerable drama of Murphy's still lifes.

Everything has to happen within the painting for it to work — Murphy does not rely on titles, or any of the other tricks artists use to sneak content into a picture. She has no formulas and she does not make variations. The nine paintings and five drawings are exactly that — distinct works that presented Murphy with their own unique set of challenges. How do you paint a graphite study of a deer looking into the woods, as she does in Painting Drawing Painting, which is one of the masterpieces in a show filled with the discomfiting, straightforward particularities that only she is capable of attaining.



Stacked, 2017, oil on canvas 60 x 60 inches

In Stacked, the stacks of books suggest single-point perspective so subtly that you are likely to recognize it only after prolonged looking. The thicker books are at the bottom and the thinner books tend to be near the top. By the time you get around to seeing this, you realize that the lavish attention Murphy has paid to the pages' yellowed edges has become just one of the painting's entrancing and anxiety-inducing details. You are also apt to notice that there seem to be two copies of one book, as suggested by the sliver of a patterned cover echoed elsewhere in the painting. Once you get to that point, it is clear there is no end to looking, no obvious conclusion to be reached.

With its surface filled with books from top to bottom, and edge to edge, it is possible to suggest that Stacked is about the relationship between abstraction and realism. This is the fate that has befallen Jasper Johns throughout his career, and it just shows how scared we are of looking at a painting that does not announce itself in some easy way. To declare a painting's subject to be the relationship between abstraction and realism is a commonly accepted way of remaining in a safety zone where the only thing that can be discussed are the formal issues resolved in the work. In that bubble, time's winged chariot and much else don't exist.

There is no shorthand in Murphy's work: everything is painted with a stunning amount of necessary detail. Her subjects are neither dramatic nor banal. She is responsible for every inch of the painting with a passionate, if understated fervor. As I see it, Stacked might be about the fact that you will never read everything that you want to, that your experience will always be partial and limited. Or are these books about to be discarded? Has the knowledge in them also aged, like their yellowed pages? But that's not all — there is something claustrophobic about the painting, something mysterious and animated about the view, which seems true of life itself.

This is why Murphy is one of our greatest artists. It is one thing to be true to the surfaces of our everyday world, and another to be true to the dance of melancholy, joy, and solitude that is our life. Many artists know that Murphy is one of the greats, and the quality that Svetlana Alpers has described as her “stance of [...] an outsider, an eavesdropper looking in from the other side” has inspired wonderful painters, such as Ellen Altfest, Josephine Halvorson, and Joshua Marsh.

In 1980, writing about Edwin Dickinson, John Ashbery “wond[ered] once again if we really know who our greatest artists are?” As John showed by the example of his own work and life, you don't have to kowtow to the mainstream's demands to be middlebrow and obvious, and make your work dumbly entertaining or affably perverse to prove your relevance.