

BROOKLYN RAIL

ARTSEEN

CATHERINE MURPHY: *Recent Work*

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by Jason Rosenfeld



Installation view of Catherine Murphy: *Recent Work*, 2018

There are nine oils and five graphite drawings in Catherine Murphy's latest show. This includes everything the artist has made since 2013, the year of her last exhibition at the gallery. Everything. The meticulous Murphy, now in her early seventies, has honed her practice to the essentials, documenting the quotidian in her Poughkeepsie environs with more and more of a laser focus, and at an earned stately pace. Five of these works closed out her beautiful Skira Rizzoli monograph, published in 2016, but now they can all be seen together, hanging in generous spaces, and beautifully revealing the continued evolution of her inimitable practice, an exercise in concentration in two mediums.

The drawings document her studio: a floor with a whirlpool of extension cords that resemble swirls of bucatini; a head-on view of a chair-back with a workshirt draped over it; a section of the wall bearing palimpsests of artistic activity including a form resembling a moth or butterfly; and *Flat Space* (2016), a drawing whose title accentuates the overarching theme of her recent work. In the latter, a small canvas with a view of a house in a landscape lies in perspective on a bed of sketches on paper. The diamond shape of the depicted canvas draws vision back into space, its top left corner exactly intersecting the top edge of the support. Can space be flat? In Murphy's world, that is where space begins and ends. The most spellbinding drawing is *Inside Out* (2016)—another telling title—with its prosaic view of and out the lower left corner of a window. It is a study in soft shading and fine joinery. Swirls of black and grey make up the surfaces of siding seen through the mediating glass of the window. Inside is the knotty wood of wall paneling. The two vanishing points lie far off the edges at left and right, and the drawing's rewards come both in marveling at its technique from up close, and then positioning oneself far to the left of the frame to line up with the orthogonals of the studio's exterior siding, seen through the imaged window. This is when the radical perspective comes into magical focus. Piero and Eakins would be amazed.



Catherine Murphy, *Painting Drawing Painting*, 2017, oil on canvas, 51 × 72 inches

By contrast, the oils appear more straightforward. Although Murphy delights in subtle transcriptions of different textures and focal ranges, they abjure the drawings' dynamic play with dimensionality in favor of close looking. One of the most recent works in the show is *Painting Drawing Painting* (2017), a large image of a graphite drawing tacked on a wall of the head of a deer, the animal seen from close behind against a line of trees. It seems to test whether Murphy can mimic the spontaneity of a rapid graphite sketch in oils, and of course she can, but interestingly her oils that adopt a less Mangoldian *trompe l'oeil* effect and go for a more delicate touch, a more resolved vision—they do not shirk from visual play.

Two large works riff off Claude Monet's "Nympheas" series. Both were painted from a pond and worked on over two summers to get the exact light effect. The more successful, though less radical in its design, is *Float* (2015), with a snaking line of rope floats used to demarcate a swimming area. They stretch from just left of the center of the bottom edge to just right of the center of the top edge, diminishing in size towards the top. The work is epically placid, the water surface rippleless and serene but fervently colored and dynamic in its vertiginousness, bearing unclear watery depths. The perspective hovers over the lowest and closest white buoy, framed by a reflection of a cerulean blue and cloudless sky. Towards the top of the image, the leaves of trees reflected on the far bank, shimmering in the sunlight, glow with a green local color and gain in detail as the reflective water surface moves into the distance. There are fifteen buoys matched by fifteen crisp, black walnut leaves floating on the surface. The startling modernity of Monet's aqueous Giverny images, the three levels of depth he achieved in his immersive and horizonless water lilies (slanting water surface/vertical reflections/implied depth of the pond), here are productively crystallized and resolved. It is an absorbing and meditative picture.

Other standouts are *Floribunda* (2015) with its complex Escher-like confluence of overlapping imagery in the melding of a floriated table cloth or wallpaper with an array of broken crockery at the bottom bearing hand-painted floral designs: the floribunda, or reddish-pink garden roses, decorate both. Murphy used the same painterly touch for all the flowers, but their surfaces clearly vary—the printed material and the glazed, gold-rimmed pottery—in a dynamic consistent in her work. Finally there is *Stacked* (2017), with its five framed columns of books, all with endpapers out, in an abstract pattern of faded whites, yellows, and gold, with the edges of green and red covers visible. It is again a dialogue on depth both perceived and implied, its linear perspective pushed right up to the picture plane, and the implied but immeasurable textual depth of content within each conventional tome. As ever, Murphy asks us to see the world's expansive richness with her. Then to see yet more.

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