

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Beer with a Painter: Catherine Murphy

By Jennifer Samet – 2 August 2014



Catherine Murphy, “Persimmon” (1991)  
oil on canvas 25 3/4 x 29 1/2 inches

When I arrived at Catherine Murphy’s home in Poughkeepsie, New York, I was led down a long outdoor path to her studio. Murphy was working on a painting of a pie crust; she asked her assistant to put the dough on ice while she spoke with me. I looked around her studio, where curtains blocked the daylight from the windows, at other props: a branch hung from a corner of the ceiling, a mound of elaborately broken plates was the set-up for another painting, a mannequin slouched on a chair, and stuffed squirrels rested on a table. Once Murphy and I started talking, we didn’t get up from our chairs.

After a couple of hours of conversation, I opened the studio door. I found my eyes blinking in the sunlight – reminded that we were in the midst of a lush landscape, suddenly noticing the flowering

plants lining the path. We walked back to the patio for aranciatas with her husband, the sculptor Harry Roseman, while I let the air and the sound of birds wash over me. There had been a buzz of intensity to Murphy's studio, with its windows blacked out; it felt warm and slightly claustrophobic.

Although Murphy works from observation, hers are not scenic paintings. Her subjects include a garden hose and a garter snake curled on the grass, black garbage bags in the snow, pages from a coloring book, knots in wood, the edge of a chair marred by a cat's scratches. Objects we tend to ignore are pressed into our world, shown with rigorous clarity, and devoid of extraneous information.

Murphy is represented in New York by Peter Freeman, Inc., where she had a solo exhibition in the spring of 2013. Also in 2013, the BYRDCLIFFE Kleinert/James Center for the Arts hosted a retrospective of her work, and Murphy was awarded the Robert De Niro, Sr. prize.

Murphy studied at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine and received a BFA from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn in 1967. Her work is represented in public collections including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Hirshhorn Museum, and the Phillips Collection. In 2002 she was inducted as a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She was a Senior Critic at Yale University Graduate School of Art for 22 years and is currently the Tepper Family Endowed Chair in Visual Arts at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers.

***Jennifer Samet:** You declared at a very young age you were going to be an artist. How did you decide on that and what kind of exposure to art and painting did you have as a child?*

**Catherine Murphy:** I had little exposure to art. I was a kid in Lexington, Massachusetts, and I didn't go to a museum until I was in high school. I saw magazines, and I was going to be an illustrator. I wasn't athletic in any shape or form, so I would color and draw instead of going outside to play. It was always something that I loved.

There was no art in my house, except for two paintings, one of which I made a drawing of years later: "Early Influence" (2012). But when I was in junior high school, my sister subscribed to John Canaday's "Metropolitan Seminars in Art" and they would come to our house in the mail. That was the first time I looked at what was considered serious painting, and it was just in reproduction. But it was a moment of realization.



Catherine Murphy, "Early Influence" (2012), graphite on paper  
24 3/8 x 28 7/8 inches (Louis-Dreyfus Family Collection)

I was also a singer. My family is Irish – everybody sings! But I didn't want to be a singer. I had control over the world I drew. My family life was not calm; it was very dramatic. In drawing I could make a world that was mine. There were kids who could draw better. I didn't have that kind of facility you see sometimes. But I was happy, and never bored, when I was drawing, and I knew I was just going to have to work hard.

My father was a musician and trained at the New England Conservatory. By the time I came along, he was playing weddings on the weekends and working at the post office. I was very much attached to him. He was very good to me, but critical, as am I. But his relationship to music was narrow. Although my father loved to make music, as far as I could tell, he didn't enjoy listening to it.

I see that attitude sometimes in other artists when they say, "It's all a bunch of shit" about things that are happening. I say, "No, it's not all shit. You're just not seeing enough work." I'm a great lover of looking at art as well as making art.

*JS: We have talked about how you attended meetings of the Alliance of Figurative Artists. I was thinking about this when reading some of your statements about painting being about both subject and form. Some of those artists, like Leland Bell, would insist their paintings were all about form.*

**CM:** I believe that in art you start out with an impossibility – you start out with a lie. They had to say that in order to continue. Philip Pearlstein had to say that. Leland Bell had to say that. They were so vilified by the powers that be.

I think art is built out of argument. They were building a platform out of argument, and I was building a platform out of argument. I knew it was based on their necessity of having to think what they had to think.

Art is made from a conversation that you are having with art. That's how the history of art is fueled. Most artists are contrarians. We don't sit in the world comfortably, we sit in the world with questions.

When I was young, if a show was described as figurative or representational in *Art News* or the *New Yorker*, I went to see it. There was so little. I didn't have any figurative teachers at all. I remember going to Tibor de Nagy and seeing Fairfield Porter. Nobody at Pratt had told me that Porter even existed. But you can't mention a figurative painter whose shows I didn't go to.

As a young person, I didn't know they were outsiders, but some of the artists at the Alliance were so beleaguered. There was a fight onstage where Philip Pearlstein was called a traitor because he "was friends with people who didn't like us." I felt like I was stepping into madness.

I decided I would not make an argument by exclusion. It is certainly not how I'm going to make my paintings. Honestly, I don't set out to exclude anything. You can name a painter I don't like, but you can't name a movement I don't like. There's always someone good doing anything.

Sure enough, what I found out was that most artists don't dislike you for doing one kind of painting or another kind. I would have these revelations: like, for instance hearing that Robert Ryman liked my paintings when I was younger. Really?! It was a shock, but it was wonderful. I'm very attracted to Minimalism. I was drawn to it, and I had to figure out why.

*JS: And what is it in Minimalism that interests you?*

**CM:** What interested me in looking at representational painting was how the information was organized. What I loved about the Minimalists was the possibility of a simpler movement through a painting.

Minimalism and the figurative movement came up at the same time, and they both dealt with a clearing out. They both spoke to their time insofar as we thought we could start again. We thought we could make it clean. Minimalists were stripping it down. You look at that whole time, what it led

to politically, what it led to socially. We were the Baby Boom generation or right before the Baby Boom generation. We were clearing everything out.

Gabriel Laderman's quote was that he was going to remake Cézanne after nature. Minimalism was going to take metaphor out of painting entirely. Both lies, fabulous lies. You can try to take out metaphor, but it's going to come right back in. What is painting, if not metaphor?

But, as a lapsed Catholic, I liked this feeling of almost sacred intent. A belief was necessary to accompany the idea that we could start again, that we could make it all better. As much as the Minimalists eschewed the sublime, what I saw was the sublime. And where I'd seen the sublime before was the Renaissance. That was the painting I loved most in the world.

I saw the ability in Malevich to achieve the sublime without an image, which I thought was amazing. I was very drawn to it. It felt worthy of my devotion. I love transcendentalism; I respond to the things that take my breath away, and I trust my gut. Then I just have to figure out why.

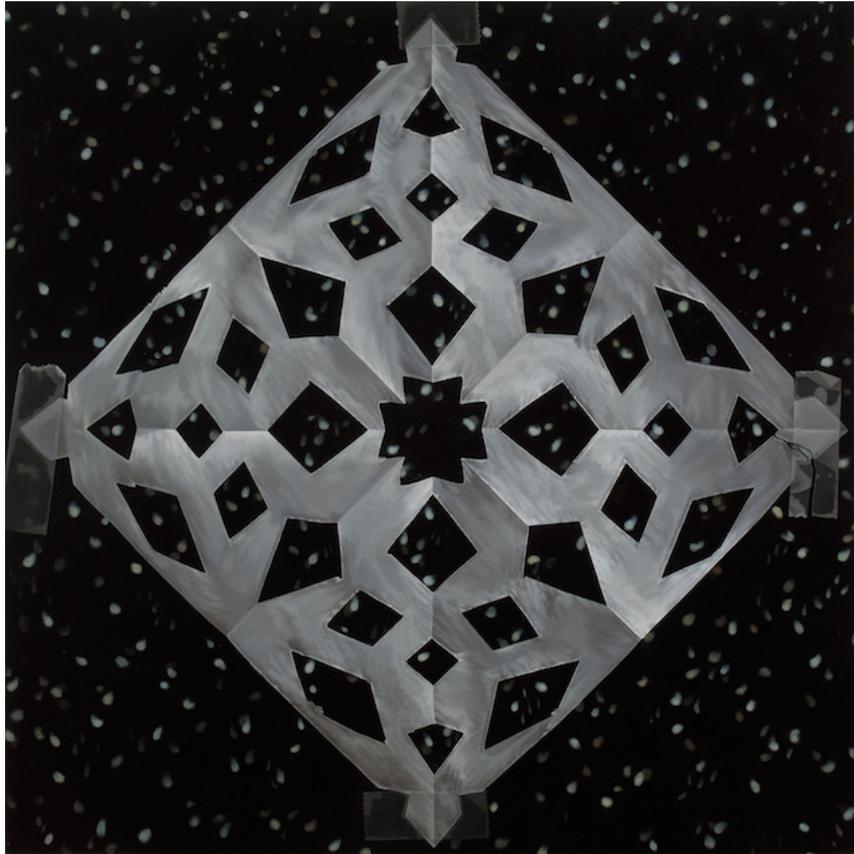
*JS: I like how, in another interview, you say that our minds have the capacity to hold and respond to both things at once: the content and the form.*

**CM:** Yes. I think it has to have both of them. I used to just say all representational painting is narrative. But I think it is all narrative, and I think form can be subject.

I had a dinner party once with a lot of painters, and I asked, "Does your painting have subject?" Robert Mangold was at the dinner. I thought he was going to say no, but he said yes. And I asked Tom Noskowski, and he said, "Yeah, but I'm not telling you!" Everybody finally said yes; they all admitted to subject. So if there is subject, there is some narrative. I'm using narrative in the loosest of terms, but nevertheless.

I thought that was interesting, and considered how I could make these two things— form and subject—mutually inclusive, not exclusive. How do I make these two things depend on one another so that they can't be separate but neither can be denied? How do I get the pitch of both of them equal but somehow supportive of one another? That is what I've been trying to do for a long time. But it took a long time to understand, or even have the courage to do.

One of the reasons I decided that subject really matters is that people buy paintings according to the subject. I have yet to meet someone who bought a painting of a subject they wanted nothing to do with, simple as that. When I love a painting, that's part of why I love it too. I see paintings abstractly, first and foremost, but if it's going to be a representational painting, if it's going to be a Descent from the Cross, I'm not going to be blind to that.



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

*JS: You spoke earlier about art-making representing a world you could control. I can't help but notice that you have the windows blocked with curtains here in your studio, even though we are in the middle of a beautiful landscape. Is it a way of controlling the environment?*

**CM:** For my first fifteen years, my work was controlled by the light and weather. It was mostly landscape. If it was sunny, I had to work on the sunny day painting. If it was cloudy, I had to work on the cloudy day painting. Occasionally, on a rainy day, I would have something going indoors. But it was difficult, because even if I woke up sick, nothing could stop me from going outside to do what I had to do.

One of the big breakthroughs for me was when I decided I could paint my dreams. It was like someone had let me out of prison. It meant that I set up situations where I controlled the light. That's been tremendous.

My whole approach to painting used to be a moment of recognition. It used to be something I saw that moved me, and I would work from there. But now, I want to make that happen for other people. Initially, it doesn't always have to happen for me. So, it comes from memory, or my id, and it often comes from recurring dreams and things I'm possessed by.

In the beginning, when I first started painting, I thought that I could be the bearer of a universal objectivity. I thought that I could empty myself out enough so that what I saw was what everyone else saw. That was my great lie. And then, in about five years, I thought, Oh God, I really have a style! So, then I got interested in the idea of fiction. I wasn't a journalist; I was the visual equivalent of a fiction writer. That's when I gave myself permission to make it happen any way I could.

The first painting that I did because I dreamt it happened when I was asked to teach at Yale. I had never taught before, so it was like a dare. Lester Johnson was retiring, and they agreed to fill his class for his last semester. They hired three people to teach his class, and we each got four or five weeks: Gabriel Laderman, who was a person I admired, George McNeil—who didn't admire him? He was like a legend—and me. George was in his 80s; Gabriel in his 60s; I'm the baby. I go to bed, and I'm not sleeping well because I am so nervous about it.

I have this dream. In the dream, Gabriel and I are standing behind George McNeil. McNeil is going through a book of his paintings. Gabriel and I are being very polite, saying, "Oh, yes, George, that's a good one." He gets to the last page of the book and I say, "George, that's not your painting. That's my painting." All that was on the page was a blackboard, the edge of the blackboard was wood, and a white wall. Something was scribbled on the blackboard, but I couldn't see it. I woke up with a start. It was such a powerful dream. And then I got obsessed with it: what am I going to put on the blackboard? I figured it out, and I made the painting.

Then I started dreaming paintings, and thinking about paintings differently. It was the beginning of a whole thing, giving myself permission to do it in a new way. That is really what stops everyone in the world: because of an idea of who you are you're afraid to break your rules.

I got very interested in things that look spatial, but are not spatial. One example was a drawing that I did of a freckled back. It looked like the universe and in fact it had no space whatsoever.

These occurrences of no-space space still obsess me. Sometimes I think I'm not doing it, and then I'm doing it again. It's just delicious, that kind of contradiction. I love frisson of an idea.



Catherine Murphy, "Eileen's Back" (2000), graphite on paper  
26 1/8 x 31 5/8 inches

*JS: One of the things I admire about your painting is the intense raw power that you get out of images of ordinary things, like the painting of lipsticked lips, "Persimmon" (1991). Can you talk about that painting?*

**CM:** Poetry has taught me a lot. I'm thinking of Elizabeth Bishop. How do you frame it, either in language or in painting, so that people see it? How do you take something ordinary, that people see every day, and frame it so that you change the equation? That same thing happens in a poem.

The lipstick painting started by looking in my compact, and understanding that lipstick has a spatial effect. It puts your lips on another plane than your face. I thought, I'm going to do a painting about that.

In the middle of it, there was a voice in my head that said, "Smear it." So I smeared it, and I almost couldn't breathe. I saw my childhood flash in front of me. There were a lot of out of control people in my life when I was a kid. I had women come up to me, very close, with smeared lipstick all over their faces because they were drunk, or not in control. Smearing the lipstick was doing it to myself: that thing I didn't want to happen to me.

I also think about what is not needed in the painting. If there were eyes in the painting, if there was anything else but those lips, the power would all go away. It would have not talked to this thing that I wanted to talk to. That is how I make many decisions about the paintings: how I'm going to frame the thing so that you see what you didn't see before.

If the painting “Polka-Dotted Dress” (2009) had been a painting of a whole room, it would have looked like other paintings. It wouldn’t have felt like what I wanted to show.



Catherine Murphy, “Polka Dotted Dress” (2009), oil on canvas  
52 x 52 inches (Louis-Dreyfus Family Collection)

No one believes this, but I’m not interested in technique at all; I’m not even interested in making detail. I’m interested in clarity. I want to get it to the place where all of a sudden, like when you’re doing the test at the eye doctor’s and they revolve the machine, and it’s like, “Oh yeah, those are the glasses I need.” I want it to be really in focus. I want to be responsible for every square inch of the painting.

I think about how you never find a morel twice in the same place in the woods. I find that somehow, nature does not want to be seen. So, in painting, how do you stop being trapped? I love the history of painting, but you can’t get trapped there and just repeat. Do you want to be a representational painter so that you continue the tradition of a certain kind of seeing and framing because it’s comforting? Or do you want people to look at a painting so that they see again?