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HYPERALLERGIC

Catherine Murphy looks ahead

By John Yau – 2 November 2014



Catherine Murphy, "Bathroom Sink" (1994), oil on canvas, 51 ½ x 44 inches

Catherine Murphy calls herself “an observational painter,” but that modest self-characterization tells only part of what she has been up to for the past twenty years. Since 1994, when she finished the painting “Bathroom Sink,” she has gone on to complete a number of works that I believe should be grouped together because of the acute looking they engage, rather than the commonality of their style or subject matter. In fact, Murphy seems to have rejected many of the accepted tropes of modernism, such as the durable motif or signature style, in favor of something more demanding, the unblinking scrutiny of a threshold moment.

On the surface, the moment seems ordinary, and in many ways takes place in a humdrum scene with which we are likely to be familiar — a partially filled bathroom sink filled with cut-hair, a cut-paper snowflake “taped” to a window at night, or a pile of swept-up dust. What alters our awareness of these banal scenes is our recognition of the solitary dread that is present in them. The dismay is hardly overt, much less dramatized, which makes the artist’s intense examination all the more unsettling. We are looking at something whose temporary existence we have seen before, two black plastic garbage bags sitting in the snow, waiting to be collected.

In “Bathroom Sink” (1994), the view is of a round sink partially filled with water, which is doubled in the mirror, which occupies the upper third of the painting, and is separated from the sink by a ceramic backsplash. We are looking down at a figure eight, whose bottom edge (the sink’s rim) abuts the painting’s bottom physical edge, as if we are standing at the sink, and whose top does the same with the canvas’s top edge. The circular rimmed sink tilts back slightly, capped by two stainless steel handles for hot and cold water, a single faucet and a vertical plunger.

Pictorially speaking, the painting consists of two planes. One plane has a hole dug out of it (the sink), while the other reflects what is in front of it. The two planes are joined perpendicularly, at the intersection of the sink and mirror. At the same time, everything we are looking at is carefully dispersed across a flat plane.

There are ringlets of hair floating in the water sitting in the sink and strands strewn around the surrounding countertop. In an interview with Murphy conducted by Francine Prose (*Bomb* 53, Fall 1995), we learn that originally:

It started off as a painting without hair, a painting about the figure eight, the geometry of the sink with its reflection in the mirror; all beautiful shapes, beautiful geometry.

However, In the middle of the night [Murphy] woke up and said,

“There’s got to be hair.” Because the painting of the sink alone was just too static. It wasn’t going anywhere. It was over too fast.

Her interest isn’t in achieving stasis and perfection, which don’t present enough of a challenge. At the same time, by having ringlets of cut-hair floating in the half-filled sink and curled strands strewn around its edge, Murphy doesn’t simply echo the sink’s symmetrical geometry while providing evidence of uncontrollable disorder and loss. She isn’t interested in such obvious juxtapositions. Rather, the cut-hair and water underscore time’s continual passing. For what we are looking at it is a messy, partly filled sink before it is drained and cleaned. This what “Bathroom Sink” has in common with the painting, “Trash Bags” (1996): their existence is temporary and their removal is permanent.



Catherine Murphy, “Swept Up” (1999), graphite on paper, 25 5/8 x 33 1/2 inches

At the same time, consider the sequence of events suggested by “Bathroom Sink.” We don’t know who cut her hair or why. It seems like the result of an impulsive, perhaps radical decision, but we

are not given any clue as to what prompted it. Whoever did this is conspicuously absent from the scene. What we are left with is the aerial view, as if each of us is the one who decided to cut her locks, and alter our appearance. Additionally, as viewers, we can neither metaphorically nor literally clean up the sink, but it seems inevitable that it will be emptied and cleaned, and that within a short time there will be no evidence of either our existence or the change that took place.

As an instrument necessary to the cycle of cleanliness, the sink will continue to exist after the hinted-at human absence becomes enduring. Other than this painting, with its attention to details ranging from the hair to the reflections on the faucet and in the mirror, there will be no record of our existence. And the record of absence, as it should now be obvious, is hardly particular to us.



Catherine Murphy, “Cathy” (2001), oil on canvas, 54 1/2 x 64 3/4 inches

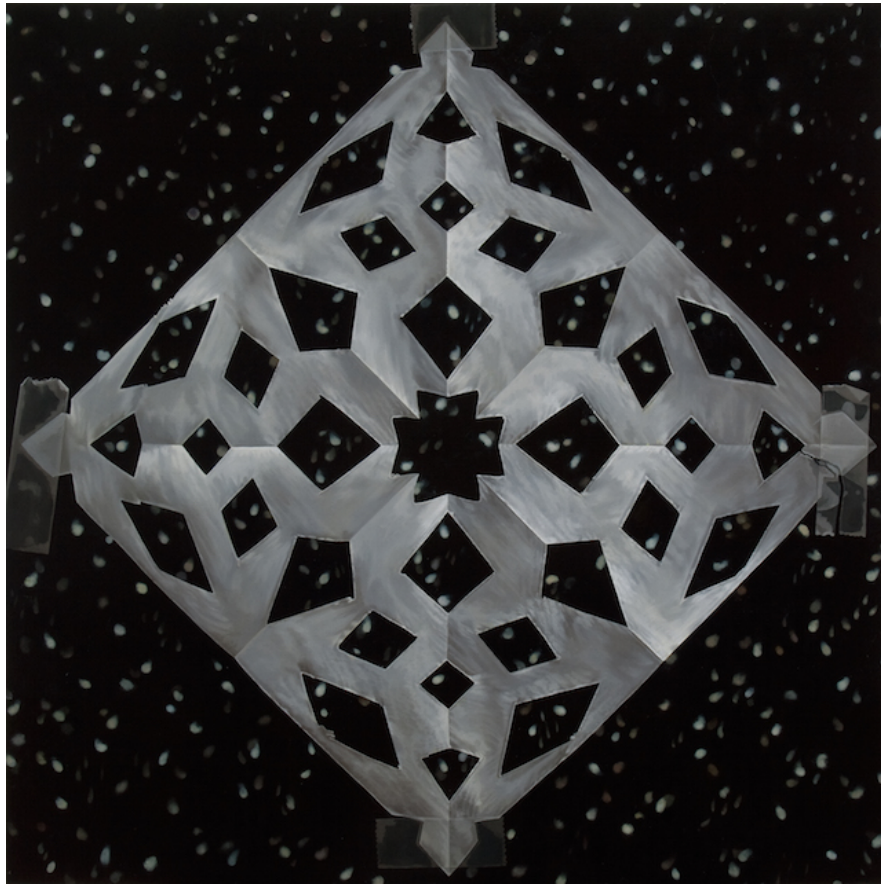
In the painting, “Cathy” (2001), Murphy depicts an ice-covered window in which someone named Cathy, presumably the artist, has written her name in large letters on the thin layer of frost clinging to the windowpane’s outside surface. Because we read the letters backwards, it is as if “Cathy” had been standing outside on the snow-covered ground when she wrote her name in big letters across

the window. In contrast to a painting's so-called permanence, the scratched signature is short-term. The season will change and the ice will melt and the window will become transparent again.

I think of the instances that both "Bathroom Sink" and "Cathy" depict as being transitory. In his groundbreaking essay, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1864), Charles Baudelaire coined the term "modernity" (*modernité*) to define his belief that the modern artist's responsibility was to make work that joined together the fleeting, impermanent experience of life in an urban environment with that of the eternal. Edouard Manet was the first artist to truly understand what Baudelaire called for. In his depictions of ordinary urban moments such as "The Railway" (1872-73) and "A Bar at the Folies-Bergère" (1881-82), he focused on anonymous encounters in which the viewer was both a witness and participant. But what has the artist's responsibility become in a postmodern world where anonymous encounters can take place on the Internet and the eternal is largely regarded as obsolete? How do we confront the unavoidable situation of our mortality, in which there is no salvation, without resorting to producing objects of distraction or entertainment, which constitutes much of what is called art these days? This is the question that I think Murphy arrives at in her paintings and drawings.

The material world persists, but Murphy's depictions of brief records of our physical presence acknowledge that they will be transformed into something in which no trace of our having been there will remain. All evidence of our existence will be washed away in one case and, in the other, melt. We are destined to become invisible. Here, we might also read "Cathy" as Murphy's pointed response to the belief that painting consists of mark-making and the artist's signature gestures. It is not that painting has died. It is that certain values that we have long attached to it have died, which means that artists can reinvent it, as I believe Murphy has done.

The washing away and melting, which are both natural phenomena, are examples of what I meant earlier when I suggested that Murphy has focused on a threshold moment, on an ordinary yet poignant instant when one order of things is fated to become another. In each case, the change is irrevocable. The cut hair will not return to its original place, and the signature will not reappear. These paintings are examinations of the volatility and irreversibility inherent in our daily life, universal conditions that many of us choose to ignore. In fact, I would go further and say that painting, which has within its depictive powers the ability to stop time, is a medium well-suited to disregard this inescapable situation. This is not the case with Murphy who seems unable to avert her eyes from the inevitable, which is that form and order are always at the mercy of time and change.



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

In the square painting, "Snowflakes (For Joyce Robins)" (2011), the ostensible subject is a white, unfolded, diamond-shaped piece of cut-paper in the shape of a snowflake that has been taped to a windowpane. It is night and there is a swirling snowstorm outside. The size and shape of the windowpane is synonymous with that of the painting's physical size. We do not see any part of the window frame; we know the window is there only we see "scotch tape" holding the creased paper snowflake 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. Instead of accepting the oft-repeated tale of painting's progress toward two-dimensionality, Murphy refuses to accommodate her work to a narrow definition of what constitutes a painting. On one side of the unseen window, as represented by the "taped" paper snowflake, is a unique form, while on the other side of the window, as represented by the turning gusts of falling snow, is formlessness and disintegration. As we proceed from here to there, from where we are standing to what we are looking at, we go from form to formlessness. This is a journey that we cannot avoid, a threshold we are destined to cross.

“Snowflakes (For Joyce Robins)” measures 52 x 52 inches, a perfect square. The scale of the painting underscores that it is a fiction based on direct observation. Here, it seems to me, is proof of what Murphy has never said about herself, which is that she is an observational painter with a philosophical outlook, who understands that abstraction and representation have become interchangeable, and to make work that focuses on their supposed difference is to avert one’s eyes. Her paintings are prolonged meditations on mortality. Her cut-paper snowflake is an enlarged version of a familiar decoration that we made as children and have seen as adults, particularly on the windows of elementary schools. We are also likely to remember that, as children, we learned that no two snowflakes are alike, and that our cut-paper versions were proof of both the snowflakes’ individuality and our own: no two of the snowflakes were ever exactly alike either.

At the same time, Murphy has compressed the threshold moment into a plane of unseen glass. On one side of the plane the unique individual or cut snowflake has been “taped” to a transparent surface, the thin barrier between the intact, individualized form and the inchoate currents outside. As with “Bathroom Sink” and “Cathy,” Murphy recognizes that even in our most mundane moments we are headed toward dissipation.

In her recent painting, “Clasped” (2013), Murphy depicts a close-up view of a woman wearing a black cloth coat and black leather gloves, while clutching a black, semi-circular pocketbook. What the viewers see within the tightly cropped view are the clasped hands encased in wrinkled leather gloves, an ordinary winter coat and a nondescript leather purse. In some ways, Murphy’s “Clasped” harkens back to Manet’s anonymous encounters, as it reveals the profound change that has taken place since Paris became a modern city. Now, instead of an anonymous encounter in which the viewer is implicated, we are placed in the role of the voyeur, the one who looks and assesses, but is not seen or acknowledged.

Moreover, by equating looking with assessing, Murphy underscores one of the deep problems of the art world, a microcosm of capitalism, which is the equation of financial success with artistic achievement. In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Richard Prince: Spiritual America* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (September 28, 2007–January 9, 2008), the show’s curator, Nancy Spector, brings up a group of Richard Prince’s paintings that were not initially popular: “The irony, of course, is that Prince’s antimasterpieces have all sold, and, in recent years, sold well.” Is Spector moonlighting as a financial advisor with inside tips on where to park your excess cash?



Catherine Murphy, "Clasped" (2013), oil on canvas, 46 x 49 inches

Although Murphy gives no further clues, it seems as if the woman in the black coat is seated on a subway or a bus, some kind of public transportation, going to or from work or an appointment. Her clothing suggests that she is middle-aged or older. There is nothing about the way she is dressed that is either fashionable or memorable. Nothing about her stands out. She is invisible, someone we are not likely to look at twice. This, of course, is the fate that befalls far more people than we care to think about. Other than being consumers, their lives are meaningless and easily replaceable. The unspoken question lingering over the painting is this: does she deserve such a fate? Do the invisible warrant this? Are they simply getting what's coming to them? Is being a replaceable consumer in the new global economy the future we get to look forward to?

I don't think that the woman's invisibility was all that preoccupied Murphy when she worked on "Clasped." For one thing, I see the woman as a member of the service class, someone who might work in a hospital washing floors, preparing meals or clearing away dirty dishes, someone who is easily replaceable and therefore unimportant. Does the art world care at all about individuals of such diminished standing, people who contribute nothing to its financial well-being? Second, consider the subject's gloved hands, which are clasped together, suggesting that she is both self-contained and patiently waiting for something. The woman's pose suggests that she is used to taking up as

little physical space as possible, to not calling attention to her presence, and to routinely accommodating herself to her invisibility. She is used to not being seen and doesn't think things should be different. I suspect she does not possess a particularly demonstrative or exuberant personality.

The gloves take up a large part of the painting. They, along with the coat's single visible button and leather purse are focal points in this black painting which, if you look closely, is full of other colors, such as green, red and brown. Although we are apt to conclude from the plain, functional clothing she is wearing that she is somewhere between her early fifties and late-sixties, the deeply creased leather gloves can also be seen as harbingers of her future, the border she is about to cross. Aren't the leather gloves pieces of cured, dead skin? Isn't the woman whose face we never see and, in effect, is invisible to us, wearing pieces of dead skin that fit her hands perfectly, like a second skin? Don't the gloves evoke that threshold moment when the individual, who in this case is invisible, regarded as secondary and therefore forgettable, passes from the living to the dead? And to take this line of thought one step further — might not her hands be similarly clasped when she is placed in her coffin? Or, if we look at "Clasped" from another perspective, might not this somberly dressed woman be on her way to a funeral of one of her invisible friends?

What about the semi-circular purse, which extends down from the clasped hands? Like the creased gloves, it too is container made of dead skin. And what does this pouch, this womb of dead skin hold? However much we may dream of elsewhere, of the material comforts promised by financial success, Murphy refuses to forget that we live in time, and rejects replacing its passing with signs of permanence. She recognizes that the material world we inhabit is indifferent to our existence. It cares nothing for our art or our poems, the marks we make. I see the black gloves, coat and purse as evidence of the shadows that accompany each of us as we move through a world of light that will soon close behind us.