

*R. HOLLAND MURRAY: recent work | oeuvres récentes*

Galerie Liane et Danny Taran

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**“On Recent Work”** exhibition catalogue essay

Jan Hadlaw

*Finally, it doesn't matter what you make. It is all about what you discover in making it, what you learn about the materials, the medium, and yourself. All our work is ever really about is the struggle to understand. It is a dialogue between what we know and what is about to be revealed.* R. Holland Murray

One of the greatest gifts that Robert Holland Murray possesses is his inability to take things at face value. It is what stops him from acknowledging, much less accepting, the conventions and expectations which organize the art world and the world-at-large. It is what allows him to see the possibilities which lay hidden behind the 'given-ness' of things and ideas. Ultimately, it is what has sustained his passion for making art for well over three decades. During that period of time, he has produced a prodigious amount of work in a vast range of media - paintings, quilts, drawing, lithographs, collages, assemblages, sculptures, and furniture. Murray's loyalty has never been to any one material or medium but rather to the practice of art, practice in its most pragmatic sense: to the discoveries which emerge in the process of working. It is his openness to possibility that threads its way through the long and disparate list of his accomplishments and provides its inner logic.

Murray's art is practiced in the rich and alive space between the idea and its expression. It is a way of working which requires acuity, faith, and stamina. It finds its inspiration not in the visual arts but in other spheres, inhabited earlier in his life. It comes from black American music: the improvisation of Dolphy, 'Trane and Miles at neighborhood clubs, and the hours-long jam sessions of musicians in his family. It comes from the street-corner poetry of 'the dozens,' that posturing, outrageous game of call-and-response that was (and is) always, forever on the edge of deadly seriousness. It is based on the belief that value accrues with risk, that if you can manage to spin out the moment of possibility far and wide, it will snare the unexpected in its recoil.

In the early 1990s, Murray began to work on the series of sculptures which would become the Parallax(e) series. Although he had been making assemblages using wood and other materials since the eighties, Parallax(e) marked a shift in his thinking. While the assemblages of the eighties were eclectic, even eccentric, saturated with colour and thick with references, the new work exhibited a greater concern with its own inner integrity. Inspired by Japanese joinery, Murray began carving intricate joints and rich surface details. The pieces which emerged were spare, attenuated and starkly beautiful.

The term 'parallax' refers to the perceptual difference in an object which results from a shift in perspective. It describes what Murray believes is a basic truth: that every 'fact' and every object has multiple, sometimes conflicting, meanings. Often, for the sake of ideological expediency, contrary meanings must be denied, humans must choose how they 'see things' and live within the order of that logic. But Murray believes that the contradiction inherent in any object or idea is its most dynamic attribute. Acknowledging and embracing contradiction opens up new and unexpected ways of understanding, of seeing, of imagining. Contrariety is not, for Murray, a simple or neat idea. It has little to do with duality or opposition. For all the drama that they possess, oppositions are stable; they are intellectual balancing acts intent on maintaining equilibrium. They are closed systems. With Parallax(e), Murray proposes that things can be both what they seem and much more as well.

Looking at these pieces, the viewer is not faced with the taut balanced antagonism of oppositions: rough/smooth, warm/cool, sharp/dull. The work in this series is not complacent, it bristles with perplexing incongruities: a dangerous beauty, a cool passion, an anxious grace. The tensions are complex and interwoven. Terms modify each other, meaning remains in flux. There is something subtly unsettled about the pieces: the odd angles of the joints, the precarious teetering on needle-sharp points. Yet there is no discord here. The pieces seem strangely familiar, beckoning in spite of their sharpened barbs and metal prongs. Their oiled flesh-tone patinas and human scale suggest some kind of practical function. Although they are often described as ritualistic, this is not completely accurate. They are not ritual objects in the sense of the Catholic cross or the skulls of voodoo ritual. If anything, what they most closely resemble are tools or weapons which have been marked or embellished by their owners in the course of daily use. Their symbolism is idiosyncratic, vaguely obscure. It is almost as if the pieces are the ritual itself.

Murray returns to the theme of contrariety in the series of three sculptures he recently completed in Vancouver. Unlike the Parallax(e) series, the only carving employed in the three Vancouver Work floor pieces is that which was required to construct the joints themselves. Each of the pieces is made of four pointed sticks which interlock at the centre to form a sort of

giant wooden bur. The pieces have a threatening physicality. Entering a room where these pieces sit inevitably provokes a certain wariness. One instinctively wants to mark out a safety zone, to paint lines on the floor, post signs: enter at your own risk. It is not difficult to imagine the sharp points snagging clothing, poking flesh. One is reluctant to turn one's back on the work. And yet somehow these prickly constructions also look touchingly fragile. The slenderness of the limbs, the way they pose tentatively on their spiny tips, make it equally easy to imagine a point being snapped off by a careless gesture, or the whole construction being tipped over. One cannot help but be struck by the incommensurability of the responses the pieces arouse.

For Murray, it is in that moment of hesitation – when one considers one's response, when one finds the place from which the piece can be safely viewed – that the contradictions of the work are viscerally acknowledged. It is here that the work itself is being judged in another, more personal, context than that provided by the gallery setting in which it is being seen. The reality of the work's fragility as well as its potential danger is not abstract and must be reckoned with. Each person finally has to 'take a position' in relationship to the work. What is important to Murray is that it is understood that the process entails taking some risks.

Murray is not reluctant to ask the same of himself. His willingness to trust the process, to take risks, manifests itself at each point between the conception and the completion of his work. His latest series of drawings, also completed in Vancouver, started out as 'notations,' jottings of ideas that came to him as he worked on the wooden floor pieces. Papering the blank walls with sheets of Arches, he would alternate between carving and drawing. The crucial part of the drawing process came when the walls were covered with sheet after sheet of densely worked images. It was then that Murray began to arrange the individual drawings into groups, working back into them, searching out unities and contrasts. The arrangements would change daily, some drawings would be altered beyond recognition, others hardly touched at all.

What Murray was after was not to lock the drawings into a single extended piece but rather to find within each one some element of reciprocity so that, regardless of how they are organized on a wall, the tensions between them resonate. What is not visible in a gallery is how provisional any arrangement of these drawings really is. Nor is it important that this aspect of the work be considered by the viewer. The fact that the drawings can be arranged in almost inexhaustible combinations is the work's secret, Murray's hidden stratagem. It permits him to escape predictability, to create new meaning from old, to propose alternative possibilities, in short, to continue to practice, to rethink, to explore.

For Robert Holland Murray, the practice of art is both an intensely personal and profoundly cultural activity. Concentrating on the process, Murray elevates the act-of-making to a form of contemplation. The acts of carving, fitting, smoothing, drawing, and re-drawing animate the work and infuse it with a dynamic complexity. With these mundane gestures, Murray blurs the neat boundaries that have been so carefully set up between concept and materiality, intellect and intuition, passion and spirit. In his fusion of thinking-doing-knowing-being, we can identify his disinclination to rationalize, to simplify. Instead, he insists on showing us life as he finds it, with its danger and its beauty, its rage and its compassion all mixed up and intertwined. In the end, there is something consoling in Murray's refusal to reduce things, to make his work more accessible: it exhibits a tenacious faith in our ability to make sense of its dialogues and to find a place within them.

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