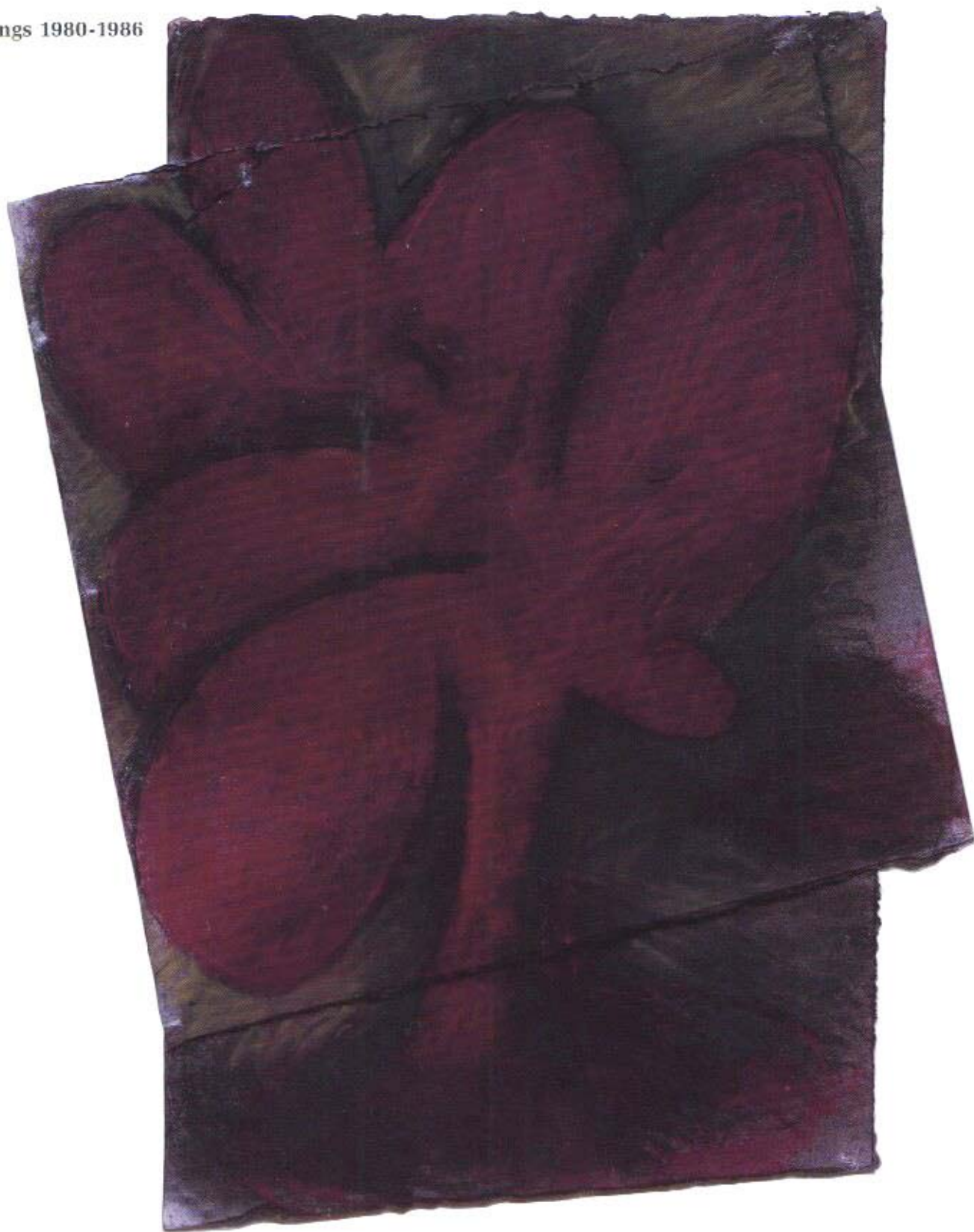


# ELIZABETH MURRAY

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Drawings 1980-1986



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Elaine A. King

With essays by Ann Sutherland Harris and Paul Gardner

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# INTERNAL SHIFTS

This exhibition presents a selection of drawings created by Elizabeth Murray between 1980 and 1986. The past six years have been critical ones for this artist. The work produced during this time reveals a crucial transition of an artist who has been self-searching, to an individual who has matured and developed a personal style and identification. This period marks a pivotal time of growth in Murray's creative evolution and identifies her as an independently courageous person who defies trends.

Although she is primarily known for her large, multiple-shaped canvases filled with irregular forms of all sizes, ambiguous abstract-representational motifs, vivid colors, and overlapping planes, Murray takes drawing seriously. Murray stated, "... I must admit that I am first a painter and the drawings are secondary to the paintings, but they nevertheless are very important to me ... they give me a type of freedom, allowing me to experiment more directly and spontaneously."<sup>1</sup> She has produced a large and powerful body of work that acknowledges "a drama to drawing, in which the artist gets involved in the act of mark-making. Drawings free you up, allowing for an openness that painting does not afford."<sup>2</sup>

Elizabeth Murray's art is rooted in the tradition of abstraction, but it has ties in the realm of figuration. A cursory glance at a variety of paintings created from the mid-seventies to the present — *Black Painting* (1974), *Parting And Together* (1978), *Breaking* (1980), *Painter's Progress* (1981), *Simple Meaning* (1982), *More Than You Know* (1983), and *Don't Be Cruel* (1986) — reveals the diversity of her work, the complex layering of her sources, and the restless creative energy of Murray's mind which continually probes new territories. As she has matured artistically, her work has become a curious amalgamation of her highly idiosyncratic iconography which appears to stem from a store of familiar styles of modernist references infused with personal inferences. An example of this melding is evident in such pieces as *Open Book* (1985) and her most recent painting, *Slip Away* (1986). Fractured but unifying formal elements connect the components of these works while color and line dazzle the drama of the canvas surface.

Because Murray welcomes change and continuously seeks new challenges, she refutes singular categorization and states that, "Things are not so easy, or black and white, when you work intuitively."<sup>3</sup> There is no denying that essences of Constructivism, Cubism, and Surrealism are evident in her aesthetic, but one needs to be careful with either classifying her complex work within a particular style or attempting to pinpoint the implied existing influences and references. With regard to Surrealism, what William Rubin emphasizes applies to Murray:

*The common denominator of all this painting was a commitment to subjects of a visionary, poetic, and hence metaphoric order, thus the collective appellation, peinture-poesie, or poetic painting, as opposed to peinture-pure, or peinture-peinture, by which advanced abstraction was sometimes known in France. Surrealists never made non-figurative pictures. No matter how abstract certain works by Miró, Masson, or Arp might appear, they always allude, however elliptically to a subject.*<sup>4</sup>

*The Rope Dancer Accompanies Herself With Her Shadows* (1916), Man Ray's pre-Dada work, possesses characteristics evidenced in Murray's art. Parallels are visible:

the break-up of the forms, the contrasts of the flat dramatic colors, and the way the panels are arranged allude to the curious abstract/figural synthesis found in a Murray piece. However, of the early modernists to which Murray has been compared, I find her to be a kindred spirit with Juan Gris. Even though these two artists differ in approach, each curiously creates an expression with strong underlying similarities. His art was an intellectual exercise in perception, ambiguity, and the multifaceted structure of Cubism. The vestiges of this Synthetic Cubist informs Murray's expression. She, like he, is a master organizer of space, comprehends the power of color, and realizes the possibilities of the double way of seeing conscious/unconscious. Although Murray states that, "I begin my work by making a big mess and then find my way out,"<sup>5</sup> a clarity of detail and external structure contribute to the glorious openness and completeness of her expression that is also apparent in Gris' art. Elements of mischief and secrecy result in her drawings from the juxtaposition of contrasting forms on multiple sheets of paper and from her sensuous, iridescent colors and varied marks.

The resulting marriage of abstraction and figuration in Murray's art comes as no surprise when we reflect back on her development. Paul Gardner's essay provides illuminating information on this subject.<sup>6</sup> She started out as a representational painter after discovering Cézanne while still a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. During the stormy, pluralist seventies, Murray made major breakthroughs in her work, increasingly gravitating toward abstraction. The critical years of her artistic exploration parallel those of the Post-Minimalists in the late sixties — the time when many proclaimed that "painting is dead" and the majority of artists of this era turned to making the art of impermanence.

In 1967, Murray moved to New York City after exploring sculpture in Buffalo for several years. Her three-dimensional experience from that period has become an integral part of her aesthetic. She recalls the years between 1967 and 1974 as "being very difficult, because I felt very isolated in my desire to be a painter. It was a time when you really questioned yourself and you really had to believe in yourself. Yet, I knew that I only wanted to paint and so I stuck with it."<sup>7</sup> During that chaotic period, Murray examined painting not only as a viable medium, but also her motives for persisting in it. Being an artist and surrounded by the most conducive environment for working can be problematic, but to cling to something which is totally out of sync with the mainstream takes courage. By continuing to paint during the anti-painting era appears to have reinforced Murray's commitment to painting. Murray's examination of self, propelled her to draw from resources which inspired her to become the creative inventor of those phantasmagorical, complicated works.

Nineteen seventy-four appears to be a pivotal year in Elizabeth Murray's career as important changes and internal shifts manifested themselves:

*Then in 1974, the appearance of such works as Two Or Three Things and Flamingo signaled a profound change — the emergence of Murray's unabashed interest in the visual politics of "colored space." In these and other paintings of that year, the content as well as the intention seems to be the simultaneous placement and activation*



of color, the aim being to give this element, in essence, a space/place of its own.<sup>8</sup>

From this time, color became a critical element in Murray's art which eventually contributed to the shattering of the canvas plane itself. Also, in the mid-seventies, the transition from the formalist to the fantasist began as biomorphic shapes, resembling palettes, ears, phones, and brushes infiltrated her Cubist planes and geometric canvases.

Murray's big, complicated paintings; resonating deeply saturated hues; and her sensuously, assertive drawings, command attention for their surfaces seething with activity. Modernism becomes discordant in this artist's work. However, its formal principles continually comprise the underlying scaffolding for her art. No matter how erratic the combinations of zig-zags, commas, angular forms, inflated hands, eccentric geometries, and streaming explosive lines become, modernist motifs continually are evident in her dramatic, energized arrangements infused with formal logic. Robert Storr discusses this formal logic in the following manner:

*She clearly understands that attention to the basic elasticity of space offers fundamental alternatives to the formal logic of painting in the '60s and '70s in which pictorial options often seemed limited by a priori ideas regarding progress of abstraction rather opening up to include eccentric inventions intuited through a direct physical manipulation of materials. Murray has reached the brave new spatial world diagrammed in the recent three dimensional constructions of Frank Stella, but not by way of Stella's academic hybrid of the formalist abstraction and Baroque spatial dynamics. . . .*<sup>9</sup>

Elizabeth Murray's authoritative handling of color and form reveals her astute comprehension of their innate power and relevance to the overall compositional structure. Unlike much of the Neo-Expressionist paintings where content most frequently overrides form, Murray's art demonstrates a unique artistic sophistication in which serious issues about isolation, temporality, and tenuous order are addressed within a sea of color and subtle wit. A delicate balance is achieved, straddling a fine line between intuitive freedom and formal order. Since the late seventies, an increased forceful expression has come to characterize her dynamic configurations in which humor, conflict, and contradiction meet and coalesce and find an outlet within multiple planes of color and distended forms. An accident is a welcomed element in Murray's work, lending itself to the manifestation of an unexpected private pictorial language, subsumed on an evocative stage. Though Murray defies Post Modernism's cynical dictates, brooding seriousness prevails in her inventive drawings and paintings. Although the impact of such artists as Cézanne, Malevich, Arp, Miró, Picasso, and de Kooning pervade, Murray's expression results in a curiously complex visual conglomerate which appears to be pushing both the boundaries of abstract and figurative image-making. Murray's art reveals an extraordinariness devoid of false pretensions or art market fashion. Its unequalled novelty possesses an integration of parts which are engaged in a continual but gradual metamorphosis. The genuineness of this expression is alluring, beckoning the viewer to step forward for closer scrutiny, in order to witness more fully the enigmatic pageantry of its silent theatre.

Murray's myriad drawings constitute a source of valuable information on her prolific

output. Each drawing is considered to be a highly finished, independent work of art. For Murray, the works on paper are inexorably bound to her evolution as a painter, demonstrating her virtuosity as critical shifts and alterations appear in the formal vocabulary of both her drawings and paintings.

The drawings created during the past six years demonstrate an ongoing process of experimentation, concluding in an articulation of assorted forms, varied lines, and mysterious meanings. Even though the drawings do not function as specific studies for her paintings, the recent hybrid variety of pastel and charcoal drawings, made on multiple sheets of paper, mirror the synthesis of elements and statements found in her dramatic 1986 canvases. This powerful clarity of vision and confidence is now felt in her intersecting, energetic, imaginative drawings.

Within this six year period of output, several distinct phases of growth are apparent. Nineteen eighty represents another transition in her approach and content in several ways. Of all the drawings in this exhibit, *Untitled 1980* parallels most closely the sensibility found in Murray's more formal works of the seventies. Not only does the contour, a meandering yellow line bisecting the primary color balloon shapes, call to mind earlier pieces, but also the opacity of the hues and the tension of the squeezed forms in their restricted space further the resemblance to familiar linear geometries. However, in *Painter's Partner* (1980) a drastic departure is evidenced; a single, uncomfortable shell-like creature occupies cramped vertical quarters. Its purity is interrupted by the expressionist treatment of the lines bombarding the entire picture plane. The colored surface areas (left unworked) enhance the heightened impact of the electrifying lines and the confined form.

Murray painted *Breaking* and *Painter's Progress* in 1980 and 1981; in these compositions she began fragmenting the canvas into multiple parts and a jagged, razor edge characterized these works comprised of multiple parts. Although a distinctive difference exists between the paintings and drawings of this period, nevertheless in both mediums, shifts and experimentation were simultaneously underway. Murray's expressionist impulse for layering lines and color in *Painter's Partner* worked to heighten the spatial depth of this image.

From late 1980 through 1981, Murray created her Phone and Shoe drawings. The frontal plane of the image is the focal point of these works. It appears that Murray's focus in such drawings as *Walk Drawing* (1981) and *Phone* (1981) was on exploring how the use of spontaneous, expressionist lines activated the forms and their space. A sensation of implied urban activity, underlying many Futurist works, prevails particularly in the Shoe and Foot drawings from this period.

The years 1982 through 1983 represent critically creative ones for Elizabeth Murray. It appears that during this time Murray engaged in serious exploration transcending formal concerns. Something is more personal about the drawings from this period of her development. An increased sense of freedom exists, with more complicated symbolism introduced. Light will continue to play a crucial role in Murray's drawings, becoming a curious, vital force now. Its presence becomes an integral ingredient to the



overall compositional structure, fusing the collaged planes, the more delicately executed lines and colors, and the criss-crossed eccentric shapes.

*Pale Tree* (1982) radiates an ethereal luminosity from within its spatial volume. Murray's overlapping of three sheets of paper stretches the implied volume of the organic shape. By filling every available space of the shaped papers with either color or line, the tilting activity of the tree becomes more pronounced by the peripheral cuts and by the ambiguous shadows cast by the deep charcoal outlines. Murray's most recent drawing made in the summer of 1986, *Tables In Love - 1* manifests a striking similarity in formal treatment to this earlier work from 1982. Perhaps, it is the inner illumination of light and the rich charcoal edging which prompts such a comparison.

*Bean Drawing* (1982) implies motion as a faint pastel orange line zips across five separate shaped-sheets of paper arranged in an irregular vertical pattern. The entire piece is activated by the positioning of the contrasting inner translucent blue organic shapes against their bright outlined background fields of terra cotta and teal-grey. The composition appears simple; it is organized with a central spine-like vertical stroke, but within this two-dimensionality, a subtle third dimension found in Murray's paintings is evoked.

The anomaly from this six year period is *Señorita* (1983). It appears as her most whimsical but unusual drawing because of its literal punning. A ten-gallon blue hat floats over a tiny, yellow glowing, dwarfed head shape. A smudged grey and orange brilliant background contains these fragmented signs of human life.

*Red Tree* (1983) is a display of Elizabeth Murray's abstract/representational resolution from this series. The two sheets of paper — a vertical rectangle and a tilted square — create a commanding sculptural presence for the assertive tree form centrally occupying both planes of paper. *Red Tree* reveals this artist's mastery of spatial organization and alludes to the sculptural construction found in many of her large paintings. A permeating explosive energy is released by Murray's raw expressionistic treatment of the drawing's surface and its impact is emphasized by the deliberateness of her linear strokes and shading.

Picasso's, pre-Cubist, primitive imagery is evoked in *Sophie Last Summer* (1983). This is a somewhat haunting and vulnerable drawing because of the subject of this image and its translucent coloration. What appear to resemble fragmented human limbs float in a fluid grey-black substance. The fragility of the thinly executed white/blue organic forms become interrupted by the inner prevailing red areas and the outlines of blended colors which define the forms against their field.

Throughout this period (1982 - 1983), Murray's drawings became more spatially complex, and her intelligent humor increasingly surfaced. In the works from 1985 to the present, this wit manifested in zany dialogues between invented, Klee-like creatures has become a prominent element in her drawings. Multiplying levels of color, surface relief, and form push and pull at the ground. Vivid chiaroscuro invade what appear to be countless planes, and varied gestures add to the physicality of these drawings.

The drawings produced between 1984 and 1985 are more singularly focused, with large dominant shapes pressing against the edges of their confines. Line takes a backseat

position to brilliant color and well-defined figurative forms. A whimsical note is often struck in these contorted displays of fingers and hands. *Untitled 1984*, a charcoal, pastel on two sheets of paper is an exceptional example of the output from this period. Its intriguing complex construction and organization signifies a lucid association with Gris' brilliance.

In 1985, the experiments from the many years of investigation began to coalesce as Murray exploited the malleability of her materials and the fluidity of the medium with impressive results. Spatial and linear puns abound in these more softened, but assertive images. An ability to sustain a new pictorial idiom becomes evident in these individual creative expressions, and we sense a profoundly satisfying equilibrium in Murray's drawings.

An examination of such pieces as *Day's Eye*, *Ting-A-Ling*, *Kick*, *Black Drawing*, and *Untitled 1985*, clearly illustrates the melding of Murray's comprehension of modernist language with imaginative personal statements. In the 1986 drawings, a closer bridge between both of her mediums is apparent and a successful relationship emerges between concurrent sculptural concerns and surface treatment imbued with color. Drawings such as *Blue Guitar*, *Untitled 1986*, and *Tables in Love - 1* inspire contemplation.

Elizabeth Murray's art is inspiring because of its novelty and its established conviction. Her ability to stand for her beliefs has paid off as she surfaces as one of the most inspirational and inventive artists of this decade. While recent movements have inspired imitation and repetition, Murray remains an anomaly to her era. The mysterious complexity underlying her expression does not fall into the realm of fashion or recipe.

Elaine A. King

#### Notes

1., 2., 3., 5., 7.

All quotes from Elizabeth Murray are taken from a conversation between the author and the artist which was taped in August 1986 in New York.

4. William S. Rubin, "The Pioneer Years of Surrealism 1924 - 1929," in *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968), p. 64.

6. The author deliberately did not devote space to biographical information because relevant existing essays and interviews have been published. The Paul Gardner essay has been reprinted in this catalogue from ARTnews, September 1984. In addition, further information about Elizabeth Murray is provided in Allan Schwartzman's interview, "Elizabeth Murray," which appeared in *Early Work by Five Contemporary Artists* (New York: The New Museum, 1977).

8. Ronny H. Cohen, "Elizabeth Murray's Colored Space," *Artforum*, December 1982, p. 52.

9. Robert Storr, "Added Dimension," *Parkett*, 8, 1986, 9 - 10.