

THINK BIG

Atlanta artist speaks volumes in few works

By JEFFREY DAY
Staff Writer

Only seven paintings will go into an upcoming Columbia exhibit by young Atlanta artist Todd Murphy. But what paintings.

Murphy, who finds much of his inspiration from literature, works in large scale.

"I'm intrigued with monumentality," he said in a telephone interview. "I enjoy things that engulf you rather than the other way around."

Since receiving his bachelor's degree in fine arts from the University of Georgia five years ago, Murphy has been working solely on large paintings, despite the difficulty in making them, showing them and selling them.

Although the reception to his work has been very positive, he said, "people get frustrated because it's too big. They wish I could do smaller work so they could take it home with them.

"I could probably sell more paintings if I made them 4-by-4 feet rather than 12-by-12."

A selection of his recent paintings will be shown at the McKissick Museum at the University of South Carolina Jan. 13 through Feb. 24. Murphy, 28, was brought to the attention of the museum by Brad Collins, a USC art history professor.

The paintings have a rawness and often incorporate words, pages torn from books and objects. Often the works are covered with Plexiglas, which is attached with bare, shiny metal brackets.

"I'd seen this guy's paintings in Atlanta about 1½ years ago," Collins said. "I was really, really moved by it. You often see work that's good, but you rarely see work you think is exceptional. I think his work needs to be presented. This guy's hot."

The artist is represented by The Lowe Gallery in Atlanta, and an exhibit of his paintings recently has been touring Italy, another stopping at museums in the Southeast and a recent show at a Chicago gallery. Along with opening an exhibit at the McKissick next Sunday, The Lowe will present his work starting Friday.

Murphy, who grew up in Chicago and Atlanta, looks to sources ranging from mythology to modern litera-



A drawing by Todd Murphy, whose art will be on view at Mc

See Murphy, 4F

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Murphy

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ure and drama. He often includes writing in his paintings, and along with the images, these are tied to the works of playwright Sam Sheppard, philosopher Baruch Spinoza, poet Charles Bukowski and Samuel Beckett, whose writings have inspired artist Jasper Johns.

"The thrust of my creativity comes out of what I read," Murphy said. "I just constantly have a book in my hand. It stands to reason that there would be a lot of references to literature and mythology."

Of a painting with Sheppard's features in it, "We find ourselves inside the head of the man who wrote such plays of passion and frustration as

'True West' and 'Fool for Love,' Collins wrote in an essay on Murphy. "We should note, however, that despite the angry bafflement he and we feel, the experience is not a negative one."

In Beckett's writing, Murphy relates to the character called Murphy, the hero of "Foirades."

"Murphy is Beckett's everyman, embarked on the impossible journey of life," Collins wrote. "What Beckett and Murphy find so admirable in this character is that he does not give in to his despair."

The paintings "convey what Spinoza would call a 'mature' sense of reality," according to Collins. "Men and women can only be truly free ... if they face both their own limitations and the purposeless nature of the universe. This sober philosophy informs many of Murphy's

paintings."

Although Murphy has been making art since he was a child, only after he entered the university where he was an art major with a minor in Russian did he become a reader.

Not surprisingly, given Collins' description of Murphy's strength in facing reality and its difficulties, the artist has little interest in further formal education. After undergraduate studies, he worked briefly in Los Angeles, traveled to the Soviet Union and Africa, but almost immediately began painting as a professional.

Graduate school is "more of a place where you're allowed to live in a fantasy world."

Working as an artist challenges him with the job of showing and selling his work without sacrificing his integrity. This real life struggle shows up in his paintings.