

# EMPHATIC BRUSHWORK

BY AMY JINKNER-LLOYD

**T**he glow is gone from Todd Murphy's paintings: The faintly ochre underpainting that gave his monumental pictures the aura of an uncleaned Rembrandt — mellowed to a comforting stage by yellowed varnish — is nowhere to be seen in his new show at The Lowe Gallery.

This new group of pictures is called "The White Paintings," which may surprise you, considering the list of ingredients: tar, photocollage and oil paint on canvas over Masonite. I didn't bother to count the number of paintings, drawings and sculptures on view — every room, wall, stairwell and out-of-the-way nook in the cavernous gallery is filled with Murphys.

Murphy integrates his work more than most artists do. His primarily found-object sculptures are pieces in their own right, but they're the subjects of his charcoal drawings as well; eventually, they work themselves into the paintings. Gallery owner Bill Lowe has arranged a tableaux of works that shows this progression to advantage, just inside the gallery's entrance off the TULA atrium.

But it is still the paintings that make Murphy's reputation. Until this point, some viewers have wondered whether the power of these pictures came from their content or their physical size. Additionally, many of his previous paintings were covered with a patchwork of Plexiglas panels that jutted out from the picture plane; this created a construction some thought pretentious. No matter what Murphy bolted onto the surface, however, there was always the painting beneath. Now, with most of the large pieces



**TODD MURPHY:** "Untitled, 1994."

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shedding the attendant paraphernalia and extensive underpainting, the painting is all there is.

That's all there really was to begin with.

The figures in these paintings are reproduced on the canvas in photocollage, so their realism is no surprise. Quite apart from the fact that Murphy poses and clothes his subjects to suit his themes though, dramatic surface textures covering and surrounding the figures transform them from staged oddities to tableaux that ooze symbolism.

It is Murphy's emphatic brushwork, slicing through the darkness of the picture plane, that creates the dual airs of pathos and expectancy in his pictures. That's why the drawings, void of anything but simple hand-drawn charcoal outlines, possess the same mysterious aura as the paintings, without any trappings at all.

The sculptures, because they lack surface manipulation in general and evidence of Murphy's hand in particular, are not in the same league as the pictures. They make good subjects for the drawings and paintings, but as complete works on their own, they lack distinction. ■

Todd Murphy at The Lowe Gallery, 75 Bennett Street in TULA, through May 29. Tuesday-Friday, 10:30-5:30; Saturday, 12-5. 404/352-8114.