

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

Keeping his distance from the art community, **Todd Murphy** makes his own rules

BY JONATHAN LERNER PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEX MARTINEZ

Todd Murphy's art is easy to love. His images are somber and suggestive but rarely disturbing. Against a gleaming dark background he will float a horse in profile, or a graceful bird, or a dress—white, strapless, maybe, and flare-skirted, often without a wearer. These "paintings," which are actually dimensional mixed-media works, most with a photographic starting point, can be quite large; there is dramatic tension between their scale and apparent simplicity. Murphy also loves shells, skulls, nests and eggs, which he calls "animal architecture"; he likes to arrange them in grids or size order, as in old-fashioned scientific displays. Sometimes he assembles found objects—rags, bits of plastic and wood, weathered bones. There was a period when he transformed such gleanings into primitive-looking doll forms, similar to figures that have populated his drawings. But more consistently he fashions animals, or animal skeletons. He claims a passion for natural history, but the sculptures elucidate a natural history of his own imagining; they are like improbable creatures a child might invent or glimpse in a dream.

Murphy is phenomenally successful and has been for nearly two decades. "Todd was the best-received young artist in the

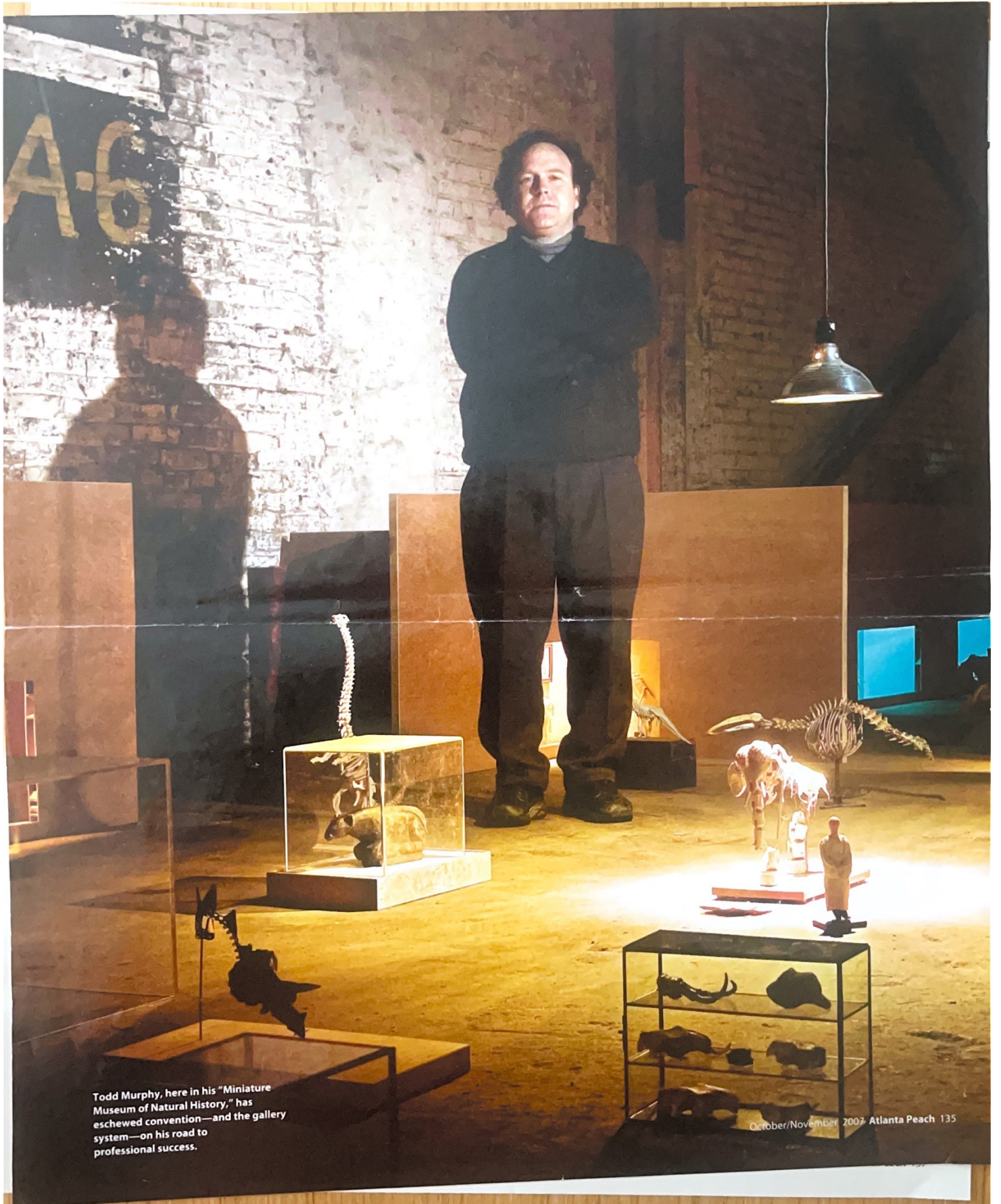
to see Murphy's art when you are out and about. Murphy himself, however, is more elusive.

The artist does not use e-mail and takes his time returning phone calls. Artists are famously eccentric that way, guarding their privacy, but you don't run into Murphy at gallery openings, either. He has little presence in the local artist community. He and his wife, Liane, live in Buckhead and have four children under the age of six (Murphy also has an older child from a previous marriage). "Seven o'clock is the witching hour," he says of his limited social life. "There's just a ton of work to do at home." Most Atlanta artists are familiar with Murphy's output, but few claim much familiarity with the man himself. And many resent him at least a little bit for his success—perhaps understandably, given the difficulty of earning a living in this trade—but also for the lack of challenge they perceive in his work. One artist disparages the big dark paintings as repetitious "brown art"; another says dismissively, "I have some issue referring to them as paintings. They are decorated photos." Other artists might begrudge him his studio—6,500 square feet of soaring space in an old warehouse near Oakland Cemetery, where there does not appear to be any unsold work stacked against the walls.

But if you are not a jealous artist, Murphy's studio is an affecting place to visit. "In the studio, the rest of the world disappears," he says. Its vastness shows the giant works at their best; staring at his pieces can be a bit humbling, like gazing into the night sky. But your mind must make a quick

"I often describe Todd's early trajectory as almost mythological!"

adjustment when you walk into another room, where Murphy has arranged low partitions. In the spaces they demarcate, he has set up tiny dioramas and spot-lit displays of little skeletons, stuffed animals, fish swimming behind aquarium-blue windows. He calls this the Miniature Museum of Natural History, his "little dream world." From a certain angle, you almost believe you are looking down a long file of echoing marble halls, and that the objects on display are real. "I've always done large-scale paintings," Murphy says. "I realized that I could take that same kind of thinking and create in miniature. Scale disappears in a weird way. You understand that even though it's miniature,



Todd Murphy, here in his "Miniature Museum of Natural History," has eschewed convention—and the gallery system—on his road to professional success.

TODD MURPHY

it's large. That gave me the opportunity to go in and start creating these narratives that are taking place in the 'real' environment but are completely vague."

Narrative, in visual art, hardly needs to be explicit: You need only see the empty dress, for example, to begin wondering where the woman went, and why. "In my work, even if the narrative is very, very vague (and it tends to be more so now than ever)," it is still there, Murphy says, citing this as his inheritance from the Southern literary tradition and compulsion to tell stories. Born in Chicago, he moved to Atlanta with his family at age 11, attended the University of Georgia, and, except for an obligatory "minute and a half" in New York, has lived in Charlottesville, Virginia, and Atlanta ever since. Artist and curator Larry Jens Anderson, characterizing Murphy's work as "melancholy," calls it "Southern Rot Art. It has the feeling of decay that is so popular in the furniture, memorabilia and architecture of places like Natchez. Both the sculptures and the paintings look like *old* found objects, with cloudy images that evoke memories." Murphy accepts the "rot" label with enthusiasm. "Some people have criticized the work for being fragile, or broken or cracked, and that's the point—that [the images are] decaying and evolving in some way," he says. "That's definitely a Southern aesthetic."

Murphy's work is not overtly political, with the exception of two pieces he did while living in Charlottesville. Both concern Sally Hemings, the slave who many historians believe bore children fathered by her owner, Thomas Jefferson. Murphy made these pieces at a time of particular controversy surrounding that possibility. One is an installation painting depicting a black woman wearing one of his signature white dresses, in which she holds a falcon on her outstretched hand, and her arm and the bird throw a shadow right off the picture plane onto the wall behind it. "The falcon," Murphy says, "has a resonance with slavery. The falcon is free to fly—but returns." By his own standards this piece offers the viewer an unusually full narrative. But the other Hemings piece was distilled to pure essence. It was another empty white dress—this time made of sailcloth, 30 feet tall, flying like a flag atop a 10-story railroad coal tower. Although it was vandalized twice while it was up, he says the painting had "no political agenda. All I wanted to do was have [Hemings] as a person who lived. It was a memorial to her." So does an artist have an obligation to offer social commentary? "My politics is creativity," Murphy says. "The artist's job is to inspire. That's about it."

Art may not need to be political, but shouldn't it do more than entertain? Carrie Przybilla, adjunct curator of modern and contemporary art at the High Museum of Art, first visited Murphy's studio around 1990. The paintings "were very theatrical. And he was living this chic, boho life before his first marriage, living in this raw loft space," she recalls, "He was young. I thought the work was interesting, but I also thought that it was fashionable rather than saying something." Later, though, she was captivated by and mounted a show of his sculptures and drawings. These were "much more improvisational." About his work in general, Przybilla notes that "there's a romantic quality, which is what makes it so easy to

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like. Because it's not confrontational, you can impose whatever you want as a viewer. [And] the sculptures and drawings have a directness. You get a sense of a person involved in the making of this thing. There isn't a pretension. It doesn't have to have flash or polish."

Lowe, whose promotion of Murphy's earlier paintings propelled what he calls the artist's "meteoric rise to prominence," also showed the sculptures. "That did not strike a chord with the market," he says. "People found them interesting to experience but had no interest in collecting them." Neither he nor Murphy comments on why their business relationship ended, though for an artist whose work



Todd Murphy's artwork, such as this untitled depiction of a dress with a skirt structured of bare branches, creates a stir for what it does—and does not—say.

is as sought-after as Murphy's, there might be an urge to stop handing over the 50 percent commissions that are customary. But Lowe says, "As imperfect as the gallery system is, it is the only mechanism that exists for creating sanction for an artist's evolution and the growth of their career. My concern for Todd is that there is no advocacy for the work, by any gallery anywhere in the country, nor any museum, nor any strong critical voice. On the other hand, maybe this is a new paradigm and I just don't get it."

Murphy would likely agree. "The model's changing. That salon model—you hang your paintings and there's an opening—it just isn't as compelling to me as it used to be." To that end, Murphy sometimes walks all the way home to Buckhead from his studio, along the way envisioning "social spaces" that could repair Atlanta's urban disconnections.

Sally Hemings' dress fluttering aloft gave him a taste for making public art and designing public spaces. Whenever he does, they will surely be political—in the root sense, from the Greek for citizen. For this work he may need dealers, collectors and other artists a whole lot less. "More and more, the people that I'm interested in are around the development, planning, design, architecture world," he says, asserting that "architecture and art have collided" already; and perhaps he is right. Todd Murphy may be the most bankable, and most accessible, artist ever to come out of Atlanta. "I walk through the city," he says now, "and see nothing but opportunity." ↻



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Left top and bottom: The horse and empty dress are recurring images in Murphy’s work; *Top left*: Untitled, horse with red blanket, 2007, 6’ x 8’; *Bottom left*: Untitled, dress with hay, 2006, 55” x 45”. Below: Todd Murphy with what he calls “animal architecture.”

