

VISUAL ARTS THIS WEEKEND

More style than substance

Grandly scaled works beg question: What's the point?

By Catherine Fox
VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

Todd Murphy's paintings are as alluring as a handsome, mysterious stranger. Yet their good looks and intriguingly murky meanings don't quite overpower the nagging suspicion that there is more form there than substance.

Since graduating from the University of Georgia in 1986, the Atlanta artist has displayed a penchant for dramatic gesture. His confident handling of the attention-commanding scale he prefers has always been a key element in the character and effect of his paintings.

He has recently tightened his grip on the viewer's attention by replacing gestural figurative painting with blowups of staged photographs that glimmer seductively behind the veiled surface of painted, sometimes layered Plexiglas.

In his Lowe Gallery show, the spotlight images emerging from a Baroque darkness often suggest biblical and mythological tales.

ART REVIEW

Todd Murphy

Lowe Gallery, 75 Bennett St. N.W. 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, noon-5 p.m. Saturdays. Through Dec. 18. Free. 352-8114.

Old "Masterpiece Theatre" redux in the manner of weird dreams, they nevertheless project a contemporary, anti-heroic perspective. For example:

A figure gazing at his reflection in "The Black Pool" brings to mind Narcissus, but Mr. Murphy has replaced the handsome youth with a bespectacled man in a nightcap lifting his nightshirt as if to expose himself to himself. "King of Birds," a scene resembling the crucifixion, features a bodiless gown affixed to oarlike crossbars and standing on a chair.

Men in robes in old master paintings do not raise questions about sexual orientation. Mr. Murphy's paintings are more equivocal. In "Welcome to the Beautiful South," a male in a voluminous gown sits back on a chair in a come-hither pose and finger-

ing a pair of spherical fruits.

The seduction works. Mr. Murphy, 30, is probably the hottest young artist in town, thanks especially to his favorable reception at Lowe's Los Angeles gallery. (Paintings as big as 10 feet by 11 feet climb to a vertiginous \$40,000.)

For my money, the intimate drawings of the same themes are the most affecting. Executed in an almost offhand but very pleasing, slightly tremulous touch, they communicate an intense sense of private meaning that the large ones don't pull off convincingly.

Ironically, Mr. Murphy's ability to make anything look important creates misgivings. Is this veiled commentary, dream symbolism or merely theatrics? Is prolonged scrutiny of the work as futile as his image of a pair of pugilists squaring off while standing on chair arms? Plumbing the mysteries of the paintings is fun, but it doesn't dispel the nagging feeling that the costumed models who posed for the photos may be wearing the emperor's new clothes.



DIANNE LAAKSO/Staff

"Untitled" amply demonstrates Todd Murphy's flair for the dramatic.

0

► Art lery host and fine- the last i gallery w Buckhea

Recep hours: 10 Through 577-198.

► "I pated (Gallery: tures re Morris I

Rece hours: 1 Through ther Kin

► "I four-pe Emory

Rece Gallery, Fridays Through tur Roa

Craft shows let you take a little artistic license with gi

By Catherine Fox
STAFF WRITER

Take your holiday shopping an aesthetic ex-

ings, glass, works in clay. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday-Sunday; Dec. 12-13 and by appointment. Champagne brunch on first Saturday. Castleberry Square, 151 Mangum St. S.W., No. 102. 525-

cil for the Arts hosts this 24-stop tour of artists' studios and galleries, including Beacon Hill center. Birdhouses, Hmong embroidery, photography, dinnerware and more. \$5 buys a ticket and

paintings, photo; Saturday, 1-6 p 5339 Chamblee-I Jack Warn