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Murphy art hot, won't burn out

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Give Todd Murphy's paintings 30 seconds. "Mia's Lover" emerges from the dark gallery, with life-sized arms and legs embracing a cello. Less than a minute with this piece and the others in the gallery is enough to feel the power.

But you could give these works 30 hours. They are worth that much time and have that much to offer.

REVIEW

In "Mia's Lover" there are arms and legs which are neither and both. The bow isn't a bow. The darkness is blood. The painting is actually a photograph, the photograph many photographs torn and laced together. The paint that is there isn't on the canvas, but on Plexiglas atop the canvas. And six inches away from it is another sheet of plastic, scratched and marred.

This exhibit of only six paintings, but very large paintings, and a few drawings is one of the best things to be shown in this state in recent memory. It's on display at the University of South Carolina's McKissick Museum through Feb. 24.

Murphy works in unusual materials and manipulates them in unexpected ways. The result is much more than uniqueness. It isn't the material that is effective but the way the artist uses it to speak.

Paint, paper, photographs, Plexiglas, tar and found objects are brought together to create these pieces which range in size from 6 feet by 6 feet to several times that size.

(Four drawings line the hall leading to the main gallery. For an artist who looks to other artists, they are of appropriate subjects, other artists: Vincent Van Gogh, Egon Schiele, Willem De Kooning, Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring.)

"Mia's Lover" may be the single most affecting piece. And like it, none of these images are what they seem to be. All of them work on several levels.

Three huge pictures of striding men, all titled "Crossroads," fill the single long wall of the gallery. The canvas on each is thick with paint and tar; words which you can't read are stenciled on it.

Suspended in front of this is Plexiglas with a huge figure from the head to the hips caught in mid-stride. These cast a shadow back to the canvas creating a double image that is at odds with itself.

In "I Decline" the shadows are of words falling from the Plexiglas cover back onto the canvas and even onto the gallery wall.

In a well-designed essay package available at the museum, USC art history professor Brad Collins, who organized the exhibit, provides an enlightening and accessible look at Murphy and his work.

The McKissick Museum staff, with Murphy's assistance, has done an outstanding job of displaying the work. They emerge from the darkness in all their monumentality. (These paintings are difficult to photograph. Looking at a photo of any art work is a poor substitute and in this case it is no substitute at all.)

Like so many artists who have emerged during the past few years, Murphy draws on the work of others, but does so without being imitative. There are references to Jasper Johns, the flesh tones of Francis Bacon (and Chaim Soutine before him), the angry angularity of De Kooning, the mannequins of Giorgio de Chirico. So much is there and so much is hidden. He also pulls from literature, notably that of Samuel Beckett and Sam Sheppard.

"This guy's hot," Collins said recently of Murphy.

That he is, but he's more than that. Hot implies trendy, marketable and often superficial. Once this initial heat flares out, these paintings will still be good, and may be great.

Murphy and Collins will give a talk at the museum at 5:30 p.m. today, followed by a reception. Both are free and open to the public.