

TODD MURPHY AT LOWE GALLERY

Connecting the dots in a rich show

By Catherine Fox
VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

All the world's a stage in Todd Murphy's multimedia tableaux. A darkened stage on which strange characters en-

gaged in mysterious acts appear in a flickering spotlight.

Like the theater, Murphy's work traffics in illusion. The Atlanta artist layers his huge photographs so artfully under tar and Plexiglas that they look like the old master chiaroscuro paintings. What appears to be a woman in a Victorian nightgown in several untitled works turns out to be a mannequin. Her "head" is a veiled beekeeper's bonnet.

Illusion is second cousin to the ambiguity that blankets Murphy's work like a fog. The portentous gestures and situations of his characters (whose gender is often open to question) seem to encompass a ritual seriousness and an undercutting ridiculousness.

In "Miracle Vendor," a white-frosted figure — with Mason jars on her hands and a tiara of lighted candles on a plate — wobbles on stilts for legs. Butterflies flicker in the pitch-black surroundings.

Knowing that the Atlanta artist was a fan of the late existentialist playwright Samuel Beckett, I showed a picture of this piece to theater critic Dan Hulbert. He was reminded immedi-



"Bee Boy" is one of several Todd Murphy works which make reference to bees. The Atlanta artist's creations can be seen through May 29 at Lowe Gallery in Buckhead.

ately of Winnie, the faded belle in Beckett's "Happy Days."

She was the one who prattled about her vanished social life while buried up to her neck in earth — a symbol of unconscious egotism or of valiant impotence in response to life's miseries. And death.

Perhaps Beckett's ambivalence and gallows humor are the key to unlocking Murphy's mys-

teries. But that connection does not encompass the romantic longing evoked in such works as the untitled vision of a reclining figure in whiteface contemplating a butterfly in a Mason jar. One of the images that ricochets through his large set pieces, the intimate, sensuous drawings and sculptures, the butterfly in the jar seems to suggest life's beauty and fragility.

REVIEW

Todd Murphy
10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-
Fridays; noon-5 p.m. Saturdays.
Through May 29. Lowe Gallery,
75 Bennett St. N.W., Suite A-2.
352-8114.

THE VERDICT

The most convincing proof to date that there is substance beneath the artist's seductive visual effects.

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What about the bee? The bee bonnet metamorphoses into a hive/headdress for an African sculpture in one of his assemblages, then into a microphone in a photo tableau adjacent to it. Perhaps its significance lies less in metaphorical meaning than in its phallic shape.

More than any of his previous exhibitions, this one seems to be a single expression. Though Murphy's sensuality and drama are still seductive, it is more fun to rummage through the show for thematic interconnections than to contemplate any one piece. For an artist who has been accused of being longer on surface than substance, this is a good sign.