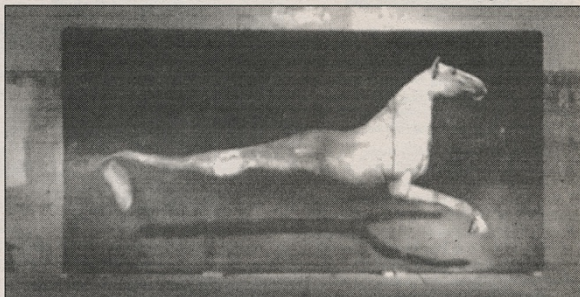


Interview

By Kathleen Sloan



"The Transformation Horse"

Murphy's Proof

Pulled by the strains of music on a muggy Friday after Five, me and mine swept down the Downtown Mall with the pulsing hoi polloi. We were arrested at the door of the Advance Auto building.

Noise, humidity, and feeble light fell away before the spectral splendor of a great white horse emerging out of the gloom. More than a painting, more than a photograph, Todd Murphy's multi-media work yanked us out of the mundane into wonder and ponder land. In his cavernous studio, soon to be renovated as upscale stores, Murphy discussed his work surrounded by his curios and art.

K. So Todd...

T. I'm a Leo and my hobbies are...

K. Are you really a Leo? Because they are supposed to have this great hair, and you do have this mane thing.

T. Well, I try to keep it tame... I get the Beethoven thing.

K. When did you move here?

T. I moved last October.

K. From?

T. Atlanta.

K. Where did you study?

T. University of Georgia.

K. What was that like? Was the training classical?

T. It's a fairly traditional school; figure painting and drawing. Not a lot of experimental art. But I was in Athens at a very interesting time in its history.

K. The bands were coming up.

T. The bands; there were a lot of people doing very interesting things. It wasn't academic art school discussions, it was people doing things whether it was music, writing, opening restaurants, or clothing stores.

K. So the people supported you in the art world there?

T. Absolutely. But there comes a time when you feel your heart and soul are being supported, but you still have to pay your bills. I went to school there and lived there for seven years and it was time to move on.

K. Was there an overweening art view there? A professor who ruled?

T. Definitely.

K. What was she or he like? Figurative, abstract?

T. He was a film maker and painter.

K. You work with so many different media. Was filmmaking part of your influence?

T. Without my knowing it, yes. I was a painter, and then as I started to develop my own voice, I recognized that I was doing a lot of sculptural paintings. When some of the things I wanted to use in front of the paintings got really large I thought I would photograph them, because I didn't want to make dioramas. Photography resolved that issue and then became its own tangent. But the painting, sculpture and photography are a means to an end. Where my art and space end is sort of vague.

K. When I look at your work and how the figure looms out of the background, it's like Rembrandt—a body coming out of this primordial ooze.

T. Right. Old school lighting.

K. You don't see it done anymore. It's really hard to use black and keep it alive.

T. Oh, I agree.

K. I can only think of a few that did it: Courbet, Caravaggio, Rembrandt. It's been lost since the Impressionists. This painting has the same Rembrandt lighting. He's in priestly robes, but he's playing a sort of '20s radio, so he looks ancient and modern, but the mysterious lighting makes it timeless.

T. I'm not concerned with what is cutting edge, new. I don't think anything really is. It's like piano keys. There is a finite number—yet people continue to make new songs. People in the art world work to invent newness.

K. Yes. And then the work becomes too intellectual. Like Frank Stella trying to push the relief form and color to the max. It feels like an exercise. I feel removed because any sense of his trying to figure out who he is is lost. It's grandiose.

T. It's bombastic. It looks like art.

K. There is no place for you to enter. You can only observe. But your work has this ineffable thing, mood.

T. It's very unpopular to do art that communicates to you here (points to heart).

K. And it's hard to talk about.

T. It shouldn't be talked about. It is. That's the language. I think you need to walk into a room or space and experience the work; to be able to, and that's it.

K. But how and where you enter; for instance, I think you must have looked at ancient floor plans. The golden section and other well proportioned rectangles are in your compositions. It gives them a lot of serenity. You're not using disruptive diagonals.

T. I read a great quote by Goethe. I'm going to misquote him, but it goes some-

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thing like, "Anyone who can't synthesize three thousand years of civilization is living hand to mouth." So I'm not afraid to reference antiquity or old masters.

K. You use a lot of found objects. Do you find an object and the work grows from there?

T. Absolutely.

K. These animals almost look 19th Century Darwinian.

T. Yeah, well that's kind of where I am right now. I'm familiar with his school of thought. The work that I did when I first moved here was about man's creation, and I don't know what that means exactly. I just know that changes were happening, so suddenly transformation became the theme. I started playing with these ideas about transformation like Jonah and the Whale.

K. Like being swallowed?

T. No. Not so much being swallowed.

Jonah and the Whale is a wonderful mythology. It's certainly a Christ reference. It's about rebirth, the possibility of rebirth. So it starts to evolve more and more and then I realized it's about evolution. So now I'm in the midst of Darwin—Victorian glass cases and specimens. I call these specimen sculptures.

K. Did you read *Origin of Species*?

T. Oh yeah.

K. I've never read that. Was his writing dispassionate or romantic?

T. Actually he looked at it quite fearfully. His ideas were well-formed before he wrote about it. For 22 years, he had these ideas. He knew the implications. It basically nullified, it was the antithesis of Christian thought. When I say there is nothing new I mean we have been struggling with the nature of God for as long as we've been able to conceive the idea. We've been trying to come to terms with division of the soul and this apparatus, the body. So for me, I'm using the Darwin thing. See look, here's a skeleton of Jonah and the Whale. The remains. So it exists. It's real.

K. Bringing the myth into material form.

T. But giving validity and living proof of the myth, because we love proofs, we love scientific evidence of mythology, scientific evidence of God or meaning.

K. So this is not just a metaphor for you?
T. No, no, no. But it is a big game. I'm in here making my things that are just little nothings...

K. That are proofs of God...

T. I have this Victorian, anthropological find of mythology.

K. How far do you take this? Did you find whale bones?

T. I made the form. They are real bones.

K. Then you named it, like God's naming.

T. There's a little fetal skeleton in there too...

K. And these look like fetish objects.

T. Yes. They're African.

K. With the horse's head. Greek mythology?

T. I'm not really aware of any specific mythology. Some of these are so politically incorrect. In some people's mind, I'm defacing them. I don't see it that way. If anything, I honor it in the only way a middle class white boy can honor it.

K. By incorporating it into your art work?

T. Yes.



"Untitled" is made of found objects, mixed media, and salt.

Murphy has found a new studio, whose secrecy he cherishes. But his work can be seen at Les Yeux du Monde, which is open during the summer by appointment only. 973-5566. ¶¶