

TAXONOMY DAY

Todd Murphy melds art and science at Lowe Gallery

BY FELICIA FEASTER

FORMER ATLANTA-BASED artist Todd Murphy continues to explore the worn and weathered Southern gothic in his solo show at Lowe Gallery. But this go-around, Murphy marries those romantic interests with the science-meets-entertainment

Todd Murphy

Lowe Gallery
Through April 19
Tues.-Fri. 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m.
Sat. 11 a.m.-5:30 p.m.
and by appointment
75 Bennett St.
Space A-2
404-352-8114
www.lowegallery.com

dimensions of a turn-of-the-century Barnum dime museum.

Murphy's brand of weird science features taxonomical breakdowns of animal skeletons, bird nests of every make and manner, and eggs from sparrow to ostrich.

In the vast main gallery at Lowe, Murphy presents enormous panels covered in fabric onto which the artist has mounted his naturalist breakdowns, including a 6-by-8-foot delicate teal muslin backdrop that displays 16 bird nests and a regal 6-by-15-foot blue velvet backdrop for 90 eggs.

In other such displays, Murphy gets a little loopier: He offers an analysis of the human figure using wooden statues and dolls, but also the more elemental forms of a triangular piece of wood placed on a plain stick "body." Murphy shows how we recognize the idea of "person" from these most basic shapes, just as the idea of "egg" or "skull" can be conveyed from a variety of examples.

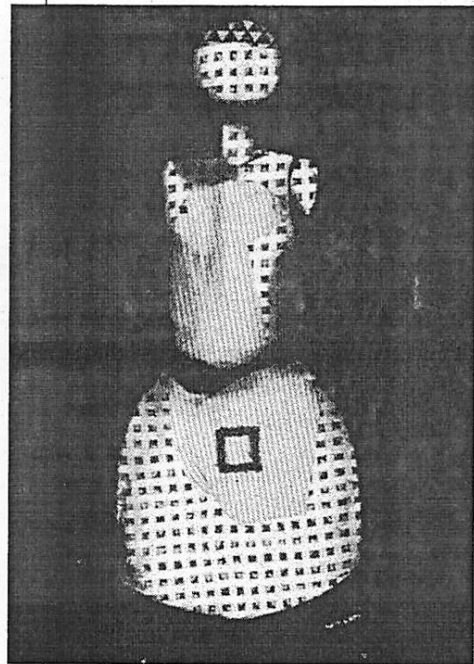
The most interesting aspect of these natural history-style objects is how they conjoin science and art, demonstrating the former's effort to understand the world by breaking down its minute features. That scientific impulse is not so different from the artist's impulse to get inside the nature of things.

But there is a slightly thrown-together aspect to these works, which are more carnival humbug than truly investigative.

Along with those epic-sized natural wonders, Murphy offers a number of works on paper that also boil down the physical world to a kind of essence, reducing the human figure to a series of basic circles and squares. Charcoal, bits of cardboard and corrugated paper are the simple materials that Murphy assembles into basic human forms. In one work, a woman's body is constructed from a piece of brown cardboard, her head a simple circle drawn above it. In another, a human figure is formed from a collection of circles piled on

VISUAL ARTS

Murphy's use of primitive, folksy materials underscores the artist's affection for the quaint and humble, which can be endearing in some cases and merely pretentious in others. Use of such naive materials by an uneducated sharecropper demonstrates an urgent need to express oneself despite a limitation of materials. In the hands of a successful, educated artist, such faux-primitivism comes awfully close to kitsch — especially when it comes with a Lexus price tag.



THE LOWE GALLERY

Untitled by Todd Murphy

The only works in this overextended show that seem to achieve harmony are Murphy's images of eggs drawn on white paper or bird nests carved and painted onto Plexiglas and set against a pale shade of green. With their plainspoken manner reminiscent of book illustrations, these bewitching renderings in delicate colors have a fresh look at odds with the brooding, busy pieces that otherwise dominate the show.

It's a difficult venture for an artist to depart from his usual track. Murphy's previous works — which use oil paint and tar to give photographs an inky, moody, Old Masters ambience — are prominently featured in the well-appointed homes displayed in shelter magazines like *Metropolitan Home* and *House & Garden*, and it must be hard for an artist to give up the temptation to feed a demonstrated demand. So one can admire Murphy's effort to try something new and alter his own canon a little, even if the