



Not quite haunting characters like the one pictured in "Miracle Vendor" are typical of Todd Murphy's play of light.

ART

Images that speak for themselves

BY BRENNAN SANCHEZ

Todd Murphy may be trying to tell us something. But don't tell him that. The Southern artist doesn't make artist's statements and he yawns at critical analysis of his work. He claims to have no idea where people get their ideas about his work.

When it came time to write an intro to a recent catalogue, Murphy chose a delightful passage that had absolutely nothing to do with his art.

To those who use certain criteria, Murphy's paintings may not be considered good. At first glance, there's too much focus drawn to the subject. Good paintings don't have such focus, they say. That kind of focus is reserved for advertising. But, though microphone, fawn, hippo or horse may be a focus of a painting, there is art in the composition of each piece. It starts in the physical construction, in rough pieces of Plexiglas, how they're bolted onto each photo, in the play of the oil paint or tar resin over it all.

The result is a murky, underwater lit sense that implies far more depth than exists in its layers, and that should be spared the indecency of analysis past the point of interest. The images are too intriguing, drawing you into Murphy's rare and precious world—maybe a country of birds and beasts called Exotica—where there is little room for intellectual dissection.

"Music is like that," Murphy says. "You just lis-

ten to it and you like it. Or you don't. But you don't need a master's in critical theory to talk about why you do like it or don't like it." It's definitely not where he's coming from. "That's what other people are about. It's amazing what people write, what they pull out of the stuff."

That said, Murphy's work does come from somewhere. He's sure it's not from his head—more from something like a dream. And he does have thoughts and ideas about it; he just dabbles ever so slightly in them. He has few words about the work he's brought to Birmingham's Robert Kidd gallery.

"It's about signal-sending, animal markings, technological devices. Anything that's about signs that send messages," he says. "It's a lot of animals, a lot of patterns. Some animals are patterned to conceal, some are patterned for mating, for display. Some are false, fake eyes on their backs.

"It all becomes part of a bigger pattern. It's a silly metaphor that makes perfect sense to me. We have our time, we send out our signals and we move on. And that becomes part of a bigger pattern."

So that's something.

"Why is it that we have such difficulty communicating, when other animals seem to do it so well," he wonders. "Or do we?"

Murphy's show runs through Nov. 28 at the Robert Kidd Gallery, 107 Townsend, Birmingham. 205.617.3000