Post-Poe Modernism

Art

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TODD MURPHY
at the Mindy Oh Gallery, through October 1

By Mark Swartz

At first Todd Murphy's photo collages might be taken for weathered oil paintings caught midway through restoration. Several Plexiglas shields hanging over each picture look as if they might be protecting the restorer's work and create the illusion that some areas are brighter, some murkier. Since I consider restoration as regrettable as colorizing black-and-white movies and believe the phrase "lovingly restored" to be an oxymoron, I was glad to find that the pictures were actually manipulated photos.

Murphy, an Atlanta-based artist who's having his first solo show in Chicago at the Mindy Oh Gallery, uses a complex process to achieve his luminous effects. I think that if he were simply trying to simulate Old Master canvases, there would be more direct ways to do so. He takes mural-size photographs of human figures and paints out the backgrounds with tar. He does enhance the color and contrast in the photographs, but I can swallow this technique more easily than I can that of colorizing movies; this is his project and he can do what he wants with these pictures. Finally, he sets overlapping Plexiglas rectangles over the pictures to bring out the depth in their glossy black surfaces, generating not merely the color black but the look and feel of darkness. Standing before these large works, one feels swallowed up by airless parlors with their curtains drawn and candles burning low. Notwithstanding the bright lights that shine on the pictures to create strange reflections on the wooden floor, the cumulative effect of these pictures is to shroud the main exhibition space of the gallery until it seems a playroom in the Addams family home.

The figures in these photos often appear to be mannequins, and they seem to have been stuck in these airless rooms a long time. A child is poised atop a rocking horse in *Romulus the Victor*, clutching a toy bird. A man dead or resting in a recliner gathers dust in *Cocoon*. In an untitled work, a ghostly figure sports a hat with candles all around the brim. In many, the faces are completely obscured; in all, they betray so little personality as to resist any attempt at deciphering their reasons for being trapped. As in the plays of Samuel Beckett, to whose work Murphy's has been compared, these "characters" exist not as human beings but as humanoid forms over which to drape a vision of life as an intractable ordeal. And as with Beckett, pushing a dark vision to an extreme can be funnier than you'd think.

But Beckett is the wrong place to start with these gorgeous and unfashionably literary works (though the surname Murphy makes it tempting). A one-to-one correspondence between this painter and that writer, between Picasso and Joyce, say, oversimplifies matters and sets up misjudgments about both artists and about the interrelation of the arts. I prefer to view Murphy as a single star in the constellation of American artists, writers, and directors who might be called post-Poe modernists. There is in Murphy's pictures, as well as in Steven Millhauser's and Thomas Ligotti's stories and in David Blair's 1990 film *Wax or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees*, something of Edgar Allan Poe's morbid sense of beauty, his obsession with the past, his dark sense of humor, and the ever-present insinuation of madness. The Poe aesthetic has been generally well nourished over the years, in literature by Jorge Luis Borges and Beckett and in the visual arts by Joseph Cornell,

Francis Bacon, and Ivan Albright (a Chicago artist who died in 1983 and the subject of an upcoming retrospective at the Art Institute). At this point an artist can draw from a wide range of images, which explains why though Murphy's technique is quite original, his art feels somewhat familiar.

Post-Poe modernism is created by solitary men in darkened rooms lined with and smelling of old books. I actually do not think it possible for a woman or a person of color to be a part of this tradition because one element of its endearing absurdity is that its practitioners are relentlessly gloomy without ever having had to endure any real social injustice.

Steven Millhauser writes elegant, detailed narratives of isolation and magic, often exploring the imaginative worlds of children and the role of the artist in society. In "Eisenheim the Illusionist," from his 1990 short-story collection *The Barnum Museum*, Millhauser chronicles the life and death (or disappearance) of a late-19th-century magician whose tricks created riots across eastern Europe. A chief of police orders Eisenheim's arrest on the grounds that the magician is erasing the distinctions between art and life, illusion and reality—but just as he's captured, he disappears one last time. "The Master had passed safely out of the crumbling order of history," writes Millhauser, "into the indestructible realm of mystery and dream." These words could serve as the caption to all the works in Murphy's exhibit, but particularly to the two untitled works depicting dresses hanging in space, with no bodies to hold them up. In one, a beekeeper's hat floats where the head should be; in the other, a beekeeper's veil. Like Eisenheim, Murphy rudely mixes reality and illusion, making his audience unsure where the photograph ends and the painting begins. In this instance, we know there is no painting, but we still believe that that's what we're looking at: the best magician can fool you even when you know the trick.

"If things are not what they seem—and we are forever reminded that this is the case—" writes Thomas Ligotti in "The Mystics of Muelenberg," a story from his 1991 collection *Grimscribe*, "then it must also be observed that enough of us ignore this truth to keep the world from collapsing." Ligotti, a Detroit-based writer whose works brood mercilessly over

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evil and death and are therefore classified as horror stories, describes a medieval town submerged in perpetual twilight, a phenomenon that results in the steady melting of the material world: "Precisely sculptured stone began to loosen and lump, an abandoned cart melded with the sucking mud of the street, and objects in desolate rooms lost themselves in the surfaces they pressed upon." Ligotti's distrust of the material world parallels Murphy's: in the "found objects" that are part of this exhibit (as well as a few drawings), he finds poetry in the disintegration of beautiful things. *Hoof Chair*, an ornate old piece of furniture, seems to have been rescued from the junkyard at precisely the right aesthetic moment, adding to the exhibit's haunted air.

David Blair's film *Wax*, a fascinating and eerie fictive documentary about how a special strain of Mesopotamian bees can lead us to the realm of the afterlife, occasionally lapses into visual effects reminiscent of early video games, but it contains beautiful sequences of bees. To me, bees have far more potential as images in art and literature than, say, butterflies: they can sting, but they also exhibit astonishingly complex social behavior and create not only elaborate architecture but honey. Blair's movie reverses the cinematic stereotype of the killer bee, and Murphy too recognizes the beauty of bees: besides the beekeeper veils and hats, bees and beehives are recurrent images. Perhaps I'm too much influenced by the creatures' supernatural role in *Wax*, but I think they function in this work as shuttles between here and the hereafter.

As guides on this trip, bees can alleviate some of our fear of the unknown. If Murphy's twilit zones frightened me when I first encountered them, after I got used to them I felt I could do worse than settle in for good.