

TODD MURPHY'S HEROIC SUBJECTIVISM  
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*Vladimir's Carrot (1989)*

“Art is not about the right color on the right surface;  
it’s about synthesizing one’s experience.”

**Todd Murphy**

# T O D D M U R P H Y ' S H E

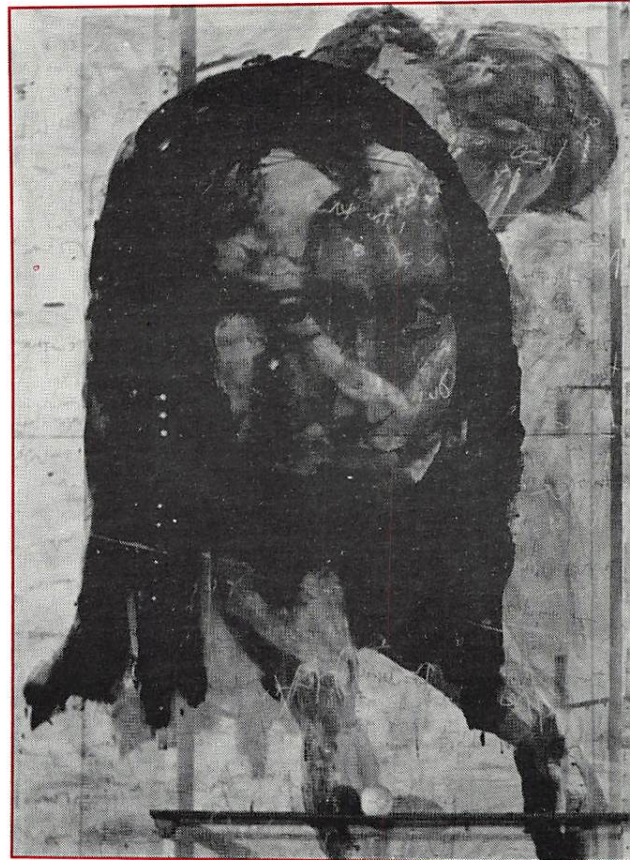
by Bradford R. Collins

Donald Kuspit would love the big, bold paintings by the young Atlantan, Todd Murphy. Kuspit, one of America's leading art critics, advocates what he calls the "new subjectivism," by which he means an art that gives access to the depths of human consciousness. Like many thoughtful observers, Kuspit is convinced that we live in a superficial culture, one whose members are endlessly diverted by a frenetic whirlwind of ephemera. The result, he argues, is a debased notion of selfhood: the classic conception of the individual as centered, active, and profound has given way to a fragmented, passive, and shallow one. An art of deep subjectivity, Kuspit contends, could provide one antidote to this sorry devaluation of personal identity. Instead of being swept along in the cultural tide—another victim to its ego-shattering force—the artist should assert him or herself. Through this heroic act, the artist could reclaim the old modernist role of prophet/leader and once again be a genuine force in the battle against the errors and abuses of capitalist culture.

The artists Kuspit looks to as models are German—Beuys and Kiefer in particular. Their American counterparts, he is convinced, have willingly succumbed to the dominant culture, largely for the purposes of fame and money. Kuspit's overview of contemporary American production, although

overly cynical in its sweeping characterization of motives, accurately captures the general mood of helplessness most artists feel in relation to culture at large. Even those, like Hans Haacke and Barbara Kruger, whose art fosters an ethically responsible individuality, acknowledge the ultimate futility of their actions when measured against the size of the forces they would oppose. In general, contemporary American artists seem convinced of both the marginality of their art and the invincibility of the dominant culture. The problem for today's artist seems to be how to maneuver that terrain; how to manipulate it for personal gain, evade it for personal sanity, or resist it for ethical satisfaction.

Neither Murphy's refreshingly anomalous frame of reference nor his more optimistic mood are immediately evident in his work. *Mona, Mona* (1990), for example, appears simply to rehash that favorite icon of popular culture, the face of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. Moreover, the diptych composition suggests a fashionably Postmodern take on the theme. During the 1980s, David Salle popularized the format as a way of suggesting a fragmented, divided consciousness. That Murphy meant to suggest something of



his own uncertainty via the diptych is clear from his choice of subject. The original enigma of this face has been further complicated in recent times by the complex appropriations of a number of artists, most notably Duchamp, Warhol and Johns. By repeating his own version of the face, Murphy calls to mind those other repetitions. Furthermore, by including the bocce balls at the bottom of his work, he cleverly alludes to the issue of sexual confusion that surrounds not only Leonardo and his famous portrait, but the lives of his three best-known appropriators, listed above.

What differentiates Murphy's

# R O I C S U B J E C T I V I S M



*Mona Mona* 1990

views on the complexity of human thought and behavior from those of his Postmodern contemporaries, such as Salle or Borofsky, is the thematic integrity of his works. Unlike the nearly unconnected themes juxtaposed in their oeuvre, those in Murphy's works, although they lack certainty and closure, nonetheless cohere. Murphy's work is marked by a kind of sincerity rarely seen since the 1950s. Unlike the work of so many of his contemporaries, which is either cool or passive, Murphy's presentation manifests a passionate engagement with the thorny issues of his work, a positive, active immersion in them.

Ultimately, what distinguishes Murphy from most of his American contemporaries is his commitment to the human—not the American—condition. For Murphy the problematics of sexuality and knowledge suggested by *Mona, Mona* are not contemporary but timeless, intrinsic to the human animal, not the products of a confusing and an uncertain era.

Murphy's preoccupation with the classic issues of human identity is evident in the kind of literature he avidly devours. Eschewing both escapist best-sellers and the fashionable Poststructuralists, Murphy prefers what is now

called the "canon": Spinoza, Emerson, de Beauvoir, Beckett and the like. One of the playwrights he most enjoys is Sam Sheppard, whose head is featured in another diptych, *I Decline* (1989). Sheppard's face appears both intense and troubled. Above the furrowed brow and down-cast gaze is a black mass of wildly tangled hair. Playing over this brooding double portrait, on both the actual painting and the plexiglass sheathing, is a fury of indecipherable messages drawn from various texts. Only the Russian word for freedom and the artist's name, both in reverse, can be read. Our inability to understand the

writing, to make sense of what is so urgently communicated seems crucial to the work's meaning. What at first seemed to be Sheppard's frustration with the confusion of his ideas is suddenly shared. We find ourselves inside the head of the man who wrote such plays of passion and frustration as *The True West* and *Fool for Love*. We should note, however, that despite the angry bafflement he and we feel, the experience is not a negative one. The intensity carried by the line, color and mood is actually life enhancing, exhausting but exhilarating.

The prominent inclusion of the artist's own name across the top of Sheppard's head reveals his sense of identification with the playwright. Another dramatist Murphy identifies with, because of his work, is Samuel Beckett. Murphy has recently done a series of paintings and graphics featuring Beckett's face. As in *Vladimir's Carrot* (1989), the writer always appears gravely burdened, like some intellectual Christ figure bearing alone the entire weight of human consciousness. The Beckett character who most fascinates Murphy, for obvious reasons, is Murphy, a minor character in one of Beckett's early novels and the hero of *Foirades* (1972). Murphy is Beckett's everyman, embarked on the impossible journey of life. Alone and without guidelines, in what seems to be a parable of

human existence, he gropes his way through a dark passageway suffering confusion, anxiety and boredom in equal measures. Beckett and Murphy admire this character because he does not give in to his despair; instead, he bravely persists. "There are places where the walls almost meet; then, it is the shoulders that take the shock. But instead of stopping short, and even turning back, saying to himself, 'This is the end of the road, nothing now but to return to the terminus and start again,' he attacks the narrow sideways and finally squeezes through, to the great hurt of his chest and back." This indomitable hero, not the real-life Beckett, is the man pictured in *Vladimir's Carrot*.

Murphy's paintings, although frequently tragic, are not pessimistic. They convey what Spinoza would call a "mature" sense of reality. The 17th century philosopher advised a life without the comforting illusions of conventional society. Men and women can only be truly free, he insisted, if they face both their own limitations and the purposeless nature of the universe. This sober philosophy informs many of Murphy's paintings, including *Gridded Monument Man* (1990). The painting features a pair of dead bodies, whose diagonal arrange-



*Cross Roads* (1990)

ment is meant to suggest that they are just two of many. The word "pithecus" scrawled across the work refers to an early primate, *Australopithecus*. The reference reminds us not only of how far we have evolved but of what has not changed—our mortality. The calm tone of the painting encourages a philosophic acceptance of the fact.

Moreover, the work has an odd kind of beauty. The bruised paint and scrawled words are oddly appealing, like a woman's body after childbirth or the face of a grandparent who has endured life's buffeting. It is the beauty not of some escapist ideal of transcendence or delivery, but of human character, of life lived in the here and now. The inverted pyramid used in this and in others of Murphy's

paintings reiterates the point. The pyramid was the invention of the Egyptians, who sought to use it as a kind of spaceship to deliver the dead pharaoh to a higher, perfect world. Nietzsche turned the pyramid on its head as a way to remind man that this earthly realm was the only, indeed the proper sphere of his striving.

Murphy's optimism about that struggle is most clearly revealed in his frequent use of the striding male nude,

his arms raised and opened. Three of these monumental figures are featured in *Cross Roads* (1990). The pose, although Murphy borrowed it from Soviet Realism, ultimately derives from images of the Classical gods. In the context of Murphy's other work, the figure refers not to an old ideal of human perfectibility, but to the heroic spirit of man, to his will, his eternal striving for accomplishment. Despite his uncertainties, flaws and limitations, man is capable of certain kinds of greatness. One of them is the greatness of a deeply self-reflexive art. The plays of Sheppard, the essays of Beckett, and the monumental, ambitious paintings of Todd Murphy all demonstrate this. What a refreshing message in this era of reduced ambition. Kuspit would surely approve.