

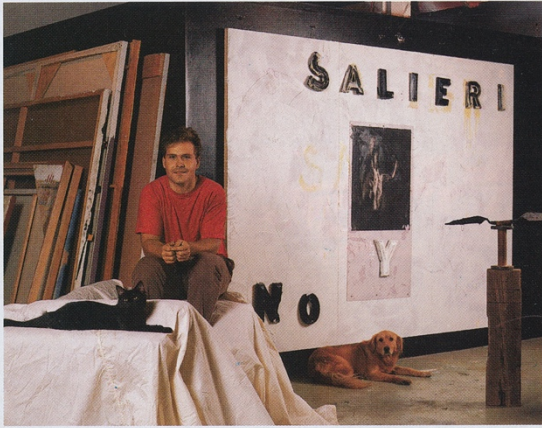
ART/WORLD

The Work of Todd Murphy



JUDITH PISHNERY

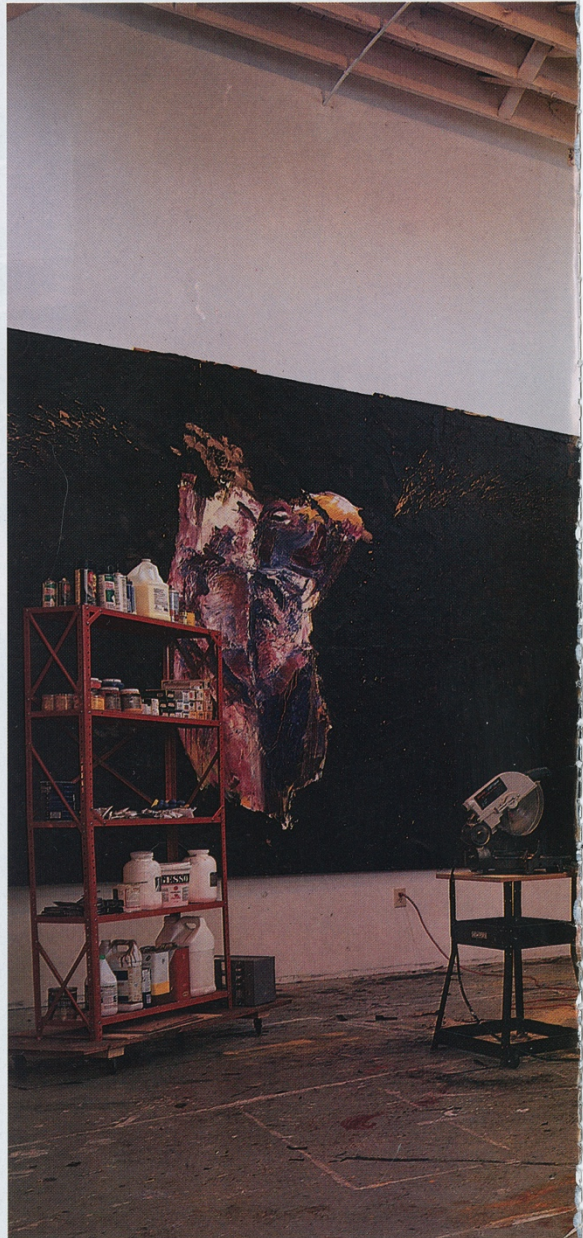
By Joseph Perrin



JUDITH PISHNER

ABOVE: In ironic contrast to the raw power of his art, Todd Murphy relaxes here with his friends. The painting behind him portrays Mozart's competitor, Salieri, who was consumed with jealousy over Mozart's gift of music. Murphy paints Salieri boxed in and beating against the darkness of his own mediocrity.

RIGHT: Monumentality and power fill the cavernous space of Murphy's studio. At left is *Daedalus*, builder of the labyrinth in Greek mythology. He escaped from it by constructing wings for himself and his son, Icarus. Daedalus is often used by Murphy as a self-portrait: "I use art in the same way Daedalus used the wings." At right is an 8x16-foot study of one of Murphy's teachers, Jim Herbert, who is used here by the artist as a symbol for all mankind. The words on the painting are from *The Vanity of Human Wishes* by the eighteenth-century writer Samuel Johnson.



A glance into the studio of Todd Murphy and one immediately senses a romantic presence in the vast spaces and large paintings which occupy his living and working environment. The scale of his work, like his studio, is spatial and monumental. His images are powerful and impressive, the surfaces painterly and bold. The structure is expressionistic, the style abstract. The subject matter is the human figure and the message is about the human condition. There is in the work and in the studio an aura of directness to the point of frankness and honesty about subject matter, form and content. These qualities are interdependent in both the work and the work place.

A structural element that is virtually always included in Murphy's paintings is "writing," which he uses to symbolize his thoughts about the human condition and art. The words may simply be notes to himself or they may be from any source that is available if the message seems cogent. They may even be written in Russian. Among the words that may appear on some of his canvases is "ARNT." This play on the contraction "aren't," he explains, "is for me a negation of what art has become." Once the writing has been introduced onto the painting's surface, it is invariably obscured or woven into the fabric of the larger pictorial idea. Yet the informal calligraphy seems to further support and identify with the single figure in a context that feels as primordial as the drawings on the walls of the ancient caves and, at the same time, as sophisticated and timely as a billboard. It may also be suggested that Murphy simply likes marks; these writings provide just one more justification to introduce them onto the surface of his paintings as "a matter of art process and as an emotional thing."

In talking with Murphy about his

aesthetic concerns, it becomes apparent that they are inextricably related to his psycho-emotional and philosophical involvements. He speaks passionately about his interests in size and scale and bold value contrasts. Almost simultaneously he speaks about their essential role in his commitment to the single figure. When responding to questions about monumentality and high drama in his art, Todd quotes the late artist Paul Gauguin. "More than anything, I am convinced that there is no such thing as exaggerated art, and that there is salvation only in extremes."

Murphy repeatedly emphasizes the significance of the entire process of painting. He speaks of starkness, a love for paint and his own self-revelation in the images themselves. His adventurous spirit and openness to the evolving image is reflected in his comment that "I think everything is essential. Some people paint just thin or just thick, but I think that extremes are important."

These extremes are mirrored in the range of materials chosen and art elements used in the development of his images and in his impulsive and contemplative behavior in the act of painting and assembling them. He sees rawness as a desirable and expressive ingredient. Strongly contrasting colors, exposed staples and cut edges of canvas are but three examples of the layering process that tells his dramatically revealing visual story. The story is strong and assertive and, paradoxically, intimate and personal. The tension produced by the push and pull of opposites—both physical and philosophical—makes the man and his work intriguing. The result of the intrigue is often an exploration of the nature of paradox.

Murphy often secures pieces of plexiglass

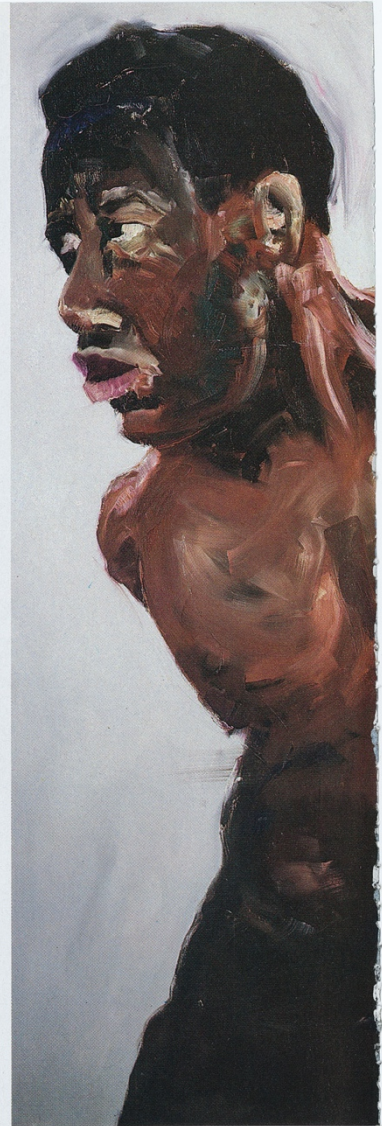
Dangling in the Tourneforte, 80x70 inches, presents Murphy's homage to writer and poet Charles Bukowski. The title comes from one of Bukowski's poems, and Murphy "used his picture to describe something I feel about him."





DOROTHY GRIFFITH

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Three Compositions in Black and White, each panel measuring 90x56 inches, reflects Murphy's thoughts on the human condition; these were completed after his return from a study trip to Africa.

or other materials to or in front of the major surface of the painting. When asked if the fragility of some of these materials concerns him, or if longevity or permanence are important to him, his answer is direct and comprehensive: "I use good materials and I put them together as well as I can. But, my paintings have a sense of mortality about them." He continues, "I place a period after my signature on my canvases to connote the idea of finiteness." He makes a direct and definitive distinction between imper-

manence and fragility: "fragility simply means that it may be easily destroyed. Impermanence relates more nearly to materials or processes that are of unreliable quality."

In response to questions about why he paints, Murphy replies, "I paint to paint . . . I paint for the love of art," a discipline that he believes connects us all to each other and to the planet itself. Art is not the realm of the rich and intellectual, Murphy believes: "Art is about everything." Among the twentieth-century artists



DOROTHY GRIFFITH

whom he most admires are the German painter Anselm Keifer, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and the Dada painters, all of whom used art to make powerful comments about the nature of society and humanity.

Perhaps it is because Murphy believes so strongly that art derives from and is about a whole society that his motivations as a painter and as a person are genuinely complex. It is also undoubtedly true that his paintings are reflective of and enhanced by this complexity. Murphy's

very liberal education and richly varied experiences are obvious contributing factors in the development of his aesthetic sensibility. These experiences include his childhood in Chicago in the 1960s and life in Atlanta in the 1970s. In the 1980s his studies, with a major in drawing and painting and a minor in Russian at the University of Georgia, led to a period of work in television and art in Los Angeles. A visit to Russia and additional studies at Harvard University were followed by travel in Europe and





Africa. In 1988 Todd returned to Atlanta to live and work.

Much of that work has been seen in many Georgia shows. Murphy has participated in exhibitions at Galerie Timothy Tew, Trinity Gallery and in the Spotlight on Georgia Artists program. His paintings will be on display in three current events: an exhibition that tours selected cities in Italy; a three-museum tour in the southeastern United States; and an exhibition at the Janice Hunt Gallery in Chicago. Recent works are also in more than a dozen public and private collections throughout America.

Murphy is an intensely serious and prolific young painter. Happily, he is not so serious that it adversely affects his creativity. Nor is he so involved in technique that his aesthetic goals are obscured. He lives and creates on many levels, each of them clear and focused in both form and content. Indeed, with Todd Murphy, what you see in the man, his work and his world is what you get. □

A major one-person exhibition of Todd Murphy's paintings opens at two locations in Atlanta on September 8 and continues through October 20. The opening reception at the Trinity Gallery from 6 to 9 p.m. will be continued that same evening from 9 to 12 p.m. at the Club Candide in Buckhead.

Joseph Perrin is head and professor emeritus of the School of Art and Design at Georgia State University. He is a painter, lecturer and art consultant.



I Declined, 80x108 inches, uses a study of playwright and actor Sam Sheppard to point out Murphy's response to those who want him to work on a smaller scale. "The integrity of the work will win out," says Murphy, whose involvement with the medium and its philosophical impact necessitates the scale of his work.



DOROTHY GRIFFITH