

TODD MURPHY: PICTURES AND VARIATIONS

BY PETER FRANK

Things are not as they seem, goes the Zen proverb; nor are they otherwise. In the terms of western logic this self-negating observation apparently leaves little room to maneuver. Todd Murphy maneuvers in this little room, however, and maneuvers with great and increasing skill. Indeed, in Murphy's hands, that little room becomes enormous, almost limitless---without growing any bigger.

In optical terms Murphy effects this spatial conundrum through a combination of traditional, even anachronistic method and technique that is nothing if not contemporary. Murphy paints with oils --and with tar, and, in a sense with plexiglass, all enhanced with such extra-painter devices as Phillips-head screws and wood dowels. He does not render his images with these media, but creates with them both the pervading illusive atmosphere, with its inference of recessional space, and the elements which admit and even emphasize the artifice of the entire picture. This artifice plays off, but never negates, the images, which, it turns out, are sources in a whole different artificial means: photography.

Murphy's figures and objects appear to have been painted, thanks to the "old-master" gloom that envelopes them. Closer inspection reveals that these enigmatic, sometimes ominous, sometimes comical, often inexplicably poignant apparitions are indeed photographs, given a painterly burr by the plexiglass surface beneath which they lie. Most of the painterly incident in Murphy's works (including the affixed shards and panels, also of plexiglass) take place atop this plexi "picture plane", enhancing the images' somewhat recessed, slightly tenuous presence.

However indistinct the images, however maddeningly elusive their crucial details (eg. the facial features of many of the human figures), the curious yet dynamic tension that exists among and between them continually promises engaging and revelatory narrative. Certainly, the theatrical scale of these "paintings" and the similarly dramatic circumstances of what the depictions they bear beg a narrative reading. Despite the recurrence of particular protagonists and particular situations, however ---the gowned or robed figure holding a large object, for instance, or the incongruous presence of geese, singly or in flocks ---no narrative crystallizes. Nor does any systematic symbolism present itself. Neither story nor iconography impels Murphy; rather, he engages in the creation either (depending on how you regard his oeuvre) of a vast mysterious cosmology or of a series of open-ended mises en scene.

If no symbolic system unites Murphy's pictures, certain of them at least evince rudimentary references. The most obvious such references, logically enough, are those "identified" with brief (if often large) written phrases, some incomplete. Such phrases appear in a few of the paintings or in similarly few of Murphy's drawings. To date, the works marked with such writing concern the most (perhaps the only) concrete of the artist's thematic concerns: Romulus. Murphy conjures the legendary founder of the ancient city (and state) of Rome with oblique suggestions of classical statuary and slightly less indirect references to Romulus' origin. No great interpretive leap must be sustained between the seated, draped figure holding two balls or round fruits together before....her? him? the person is actually male, but appears sexually indistinct orbs (especially held as they are) mimic a woman's breast; otherwise, they connote male genitalia and as well suggest the overall concept of twinning.

Why does Murphy alight upon Romulus as a thematic cipher? Reference to the Roman Empire's mythic birth, an event wrapped as much in glory as in mystery, would not seem to call for the Gothic gloom in which the artist shrouds his staging. Nor, in fact, would it coordinate with most of those staged events, themselves peculiarly spooky in their obdurate deflection of both interpretation and emotion. But if we understand the citation of Romulus as evocation of a civilization itself sunk deep into the recesses of history --and yet still firing the core of our own culture ---we see that Murphy's Roman references are not at all gratuitous. They weigh on our own situation, both that of America as a whole and that of one region in particular.

By indicating that the United States is today's Rome, trying to impose a global Pax Americana, Murphy simply affirms a comprehension at which most of the world has already arrived. But that now--facile construct contains a more touching one in a kind of reverse synecdoche: if America as a whole recapitulates Rome at its height, Rome at either end of its history ---its Greco-Etruscan seed, couched in animist legend, and its decline and fall, the decadence fiddling while barbarians clamored at the gates --spurs comparison with America's Southeast, the one region of the country (so far) to have undergone a true political and cultural eclipse.

Although born in Chicago, Murphy was raised in Georgia and has since lived nowhere else (although he has traveled extensively). He is not only aware of the cultural history of the South, but he revels in it. And he is quite conscious of the Graeco-Roman citations which abound in Southern culture, from the classical architecture of plantation manses (and the classicist thinking of the gentlemen farmers, scions of the Enlightenment, who founded them) to the place names lifted from antiquity. (Georgia itself boasts an Athens, a Sparta, a Smyrna and a Roma.) One of the central figures in the mythos of the region, a storyteller who was himself apocryphal, even bore the name Romulus' brother Remus.

Murphy's elaborations on the Southern context, of course, go well beyond classical soupcons. Rather than belabor traditional themes or play off the region's formidable literature, however, he draws upon the conceptual and spiritual ambience of such phenomena. The concentration on the human figure struggling to individuate itself even as it turns into an archetype; situations at once absurd, foreboding and laden with nostalgia taking place in an environment so dull as to be virtually self-effacing; the musty aura of gentility hanging over everything, restraining the actions of the depicted protagonists, the compositions of the pictures, and the very virtuosity of the artist; and the sense that a tale is being told not just for its own sake, but for the moral sake of the individual and the community; all these characteristics have become virtual Southern cliches. About the only aspects of Southern culture Murphy leaves unturned are racism and the deep roots of popular culture in rural (if not necessarily agricultural) settings. It should be observed, however, that by employing sometimes sexually ambiguous figures, Murphy implicitly turns bigotry on its head, making the victim by nature reflective of his or her tormentor.

The literary redolence of Murphy's images of course also fits into the ethos of the American Southeast. The works in a sense limn a theater of the mind, a kind of amplification of imagery that invokes not just storytelling, but novel-writing. The paintings certainly display a novelistic sweep and ambition. Murphy's drawings, which usually present just one thing (object, animal, or grouping thereof) as a subject of apparently agitated rendering, emphasize in their very spareness the ultimate involvement of their subjects in a highly deliberate and delicately ordered elucidation of circumstances. Although Murphy takes advantage of the drawing medium as a medium for notation, the intensity and brevity of his drawings -- ironically exhibiting the manual virtuosity his painting method obscures -- finally bespeak a meta-pictorial viewpoint, one that needs to tell tales just as it needs to make pictures. Indeed, Murphy tells tales by making pictures.

The intricate, and rather diffident way Murphy tells his visual stories, and the sensual appreciation for materials Murphy exploits in the act of "telling", infer that the artist appreciates literature that itself does more than spin a good yarn. William Faulkner would certainly be a model here; but it comes as no surprise that, however much he may appreciate Faulkner and other Southern writers for their writing and their Southernness, Murphy most favors the writing of Samuel Beckett.

The artist's Irish heritage is certainly no impediment to his appreciation of Beckett (and is possibly a key to his love of the South, whose people have also cultivated a wistful, anti-dynamic gentility in the face of political and economic disadvantage that until recently had left them with little but their artfulness). Nor does Murphy's sense of theater distance him from the sensibility of one of the great playwrights of our time. But Murphy most appreciates Beckett's prose, The author's bemused ruminations on human banality, fragility and nobility encompassing the Existentialist world view. In literary terms the vividness of Murphy's imagery might suggest the Magic Realists (whose South American Gothic mirrors that of the American South), but its pathos, its sense of isolation, of quiet desperation, of pleasure taken from minute things, all echoes Beckett's angst --an angst born of something else besides mere misfortune. Like Beckett, Murphy believes that human tragedy lies not in events, but in the fact of life itself. As a result, everything else is a kind of comedy --and what you make of life will determine where, when and how you laugh.

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