

Reinventing symbols can be touchy work

By Jerry Cullum
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Todd Murphy's newest work shows us the pitfalls of visual poetry. Like most of the work of this enormously popular Atlanta artist, these sculptural assemblages and photographic paintings are gorgeous and sensitive. They're also full of absolutely unintended offenses.

The exhibition title, "The New World," refers to Murphy's voyage of self-exploration after his wife (the equally popular painter Sharon Shapiro) gave birth to their first child.

One photo-painting, "Splitting the Girlwood," refers to the mysteries of personal transition. But the image is unsettling: A young girl in a white dress has been sawed in half. It's the old magician's trick. Above the void of her divided middle, blue butterflies flutter. (Literally; they're motorized!)

Murphy is a master at these strange metaphoric pieces. They haunt us because they mean several contradictory things at once, just as dreams do. But what are

REVIEW

"Todd Murphy:
The New World"
Fay Gold Gallery, 247 Buck-
head Ave. N.E. Through
Wednesday. 233-3843.

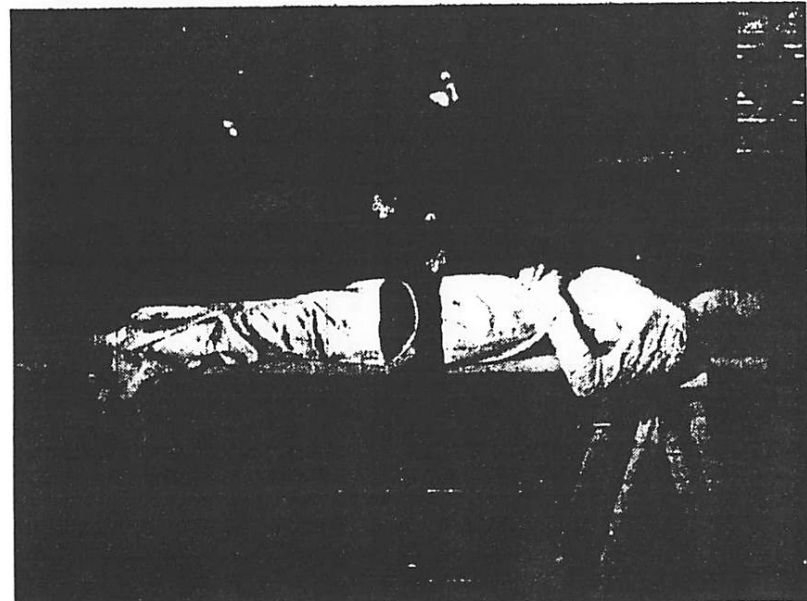
THE VERDICT

This work is enormously pleasurable, but for a few people, it may be a guilty pleasure.

we to make of an adjacent image of an African statue holding a shining Christmas tree bulb?

We find out when we discover the roomful of actual African, Indonesian and Latin American statuary that Murphy has coated with salt — another symbol with contradictory meanings. Some statues have been given new heads or turned into clown figures. Some have telescopes emerging from their foreheads or midriffs. All of them look very striking, but a trifle unbalanced.

The metaphor is completed in the back gallery by rough drawings with such titles as "The



"Splitting the Girlwood" features the image of a girl in a white dress who has been sawed in half. Above her, motorized butterflies flutter.

Spanish Explorers." Murphy is exploring his own universe as the Europeans explored the rest of the world. He takes possession of the things he finds by reinventing them. (This is his interpretation — not my speculation.)

He does this with good will: He genuinely loves the statues he has defaced and refaced. And it may be meaningful that the statues' telescopes point outward at us, so it is they who are doing the exploring.

But people might feel disturbed if (to take an extreme hypothetical example) Murphy put telescopes in the branches of a salt-encrusted Jewish menorah. So why are we not shocked at the alteration of other religions' ritual objects? Murphy means to pay homage, but he has rushed headlong into territory where not even angels can avoid giving offense to someone.

Jerry Cullum, an associate editor of *Art Papers*, is a free-lance critic.