

Post-modernist Style, Southern Gothic aura

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BY CHRIS GILBERT

Until recently I had seen only a handful of Todd Murphy's paintings. They impressed me with the rich effects he creates by placing a layer of Plexiglas over a photomontage and then painting both above and below this transparent layer. I was also interested in the mysterious quality — call it "aura" — that Murphy invests in his subjects and settings. Mostly, I was taken in by his paintings' scale — some of the works reach the size of backyard swimming pools.

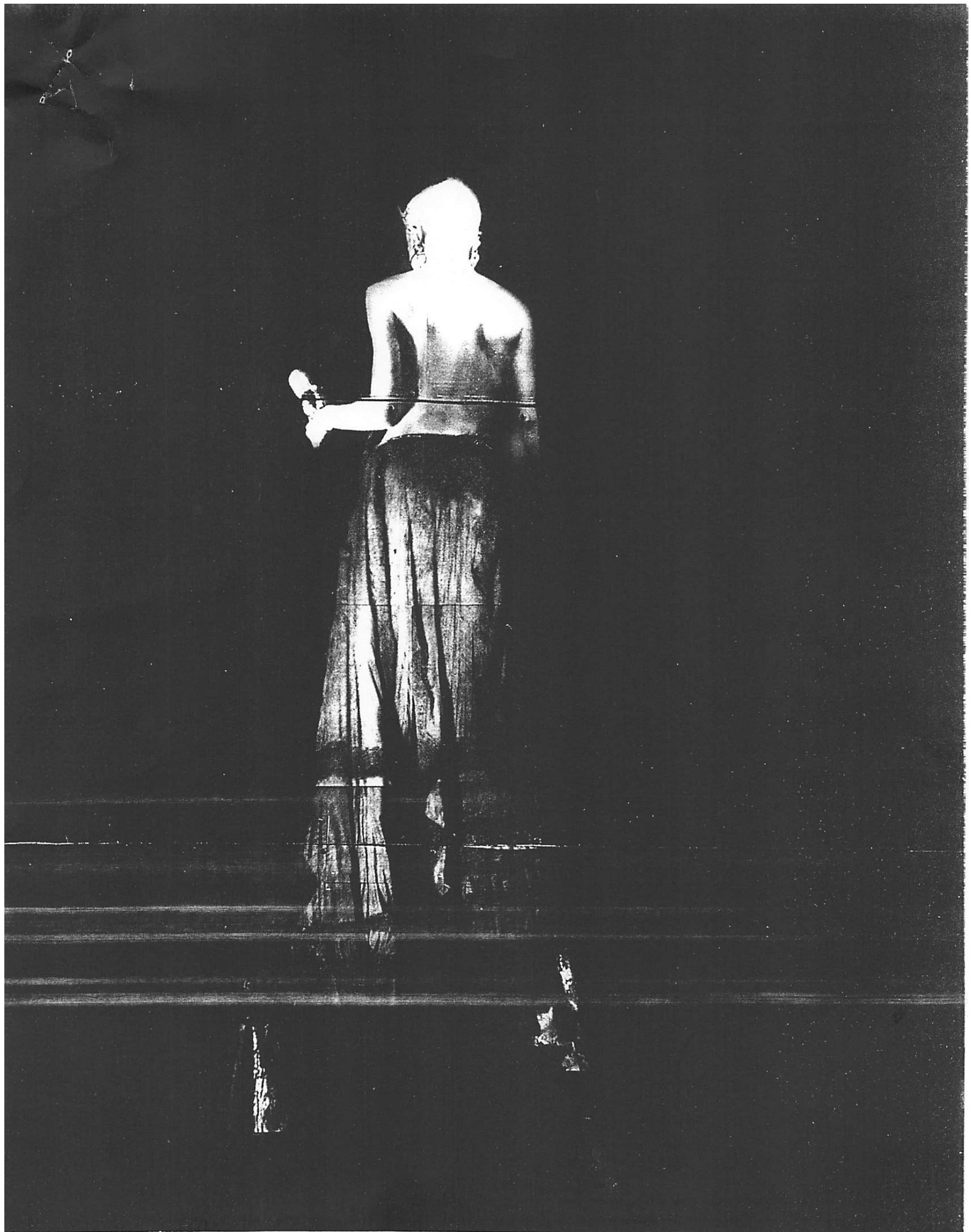
For the past decade or so, Murphy has been creating a kind of art that mixes an old master look with modern technique and is also exceptionally beautiful. Painting is something he started while still in college. Murphy took classes in film, history, and anthropology and then spent some time in North Africa on an archeological dig before returning to the U.S. at age 24 with the intention of being a full-time artist.

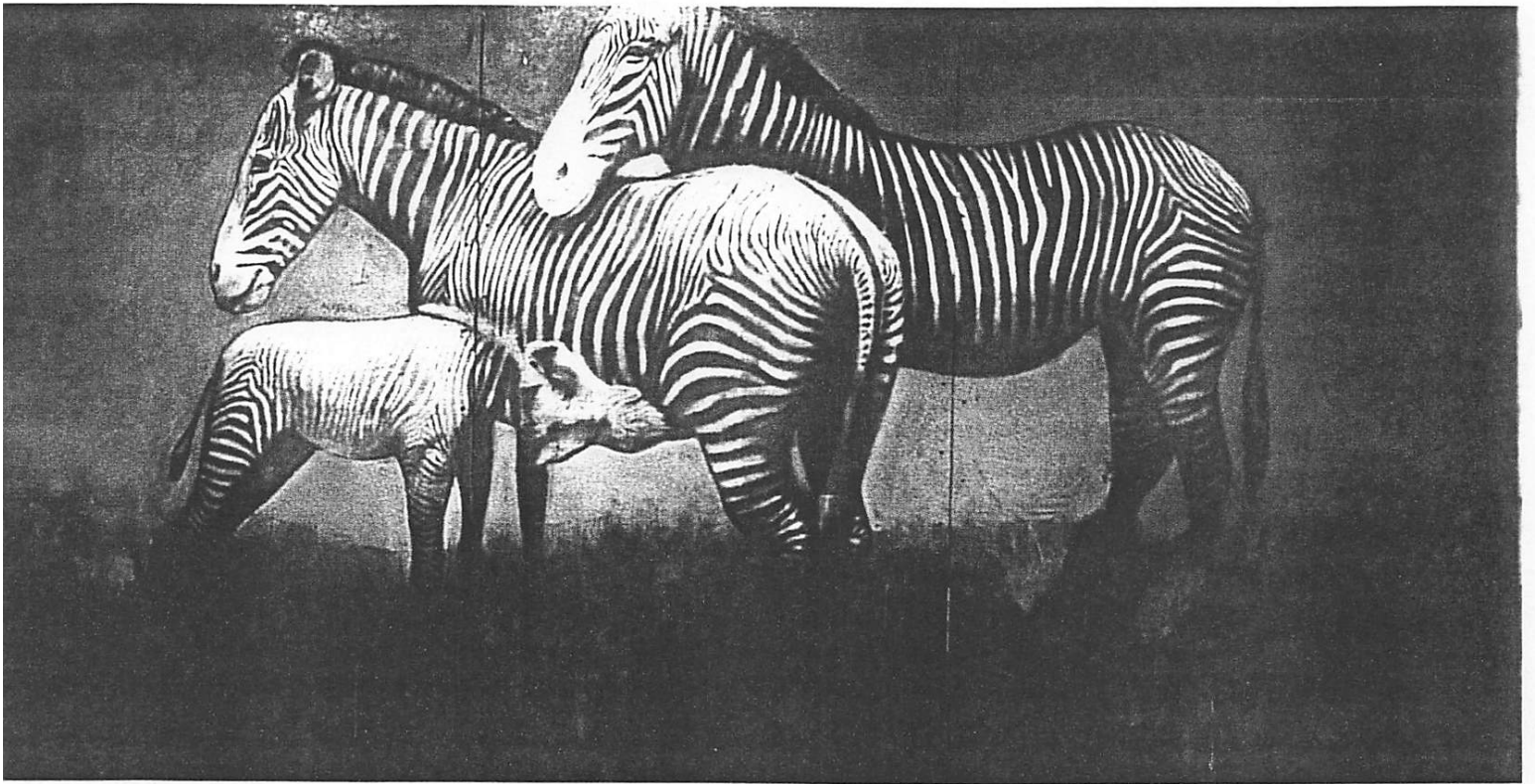
Murphy's aura-infused paintings appear to satisfy some public need; he has been able to make a good living selling his work for five-figure prices out of galleries in the Southeast and California. Twenty-five years ago this kind of openly theatrical painting would not have been possible; it would have been treated with open disdain. Now, with the advent of post-modernism, in which almost any imaginable style or method can be part of the art process, his paintings have been able to secure a new territory for themselves, both economically and aesthetically.



RICHARD ROBINSON

Right: *For Flag*; a 1996 example of Murphy's enigmatic figure paintings, a black and white photo was layered with Plexiglas and paint.





Top and above: *Untitled* and *Zebras*, wall-sized mixed media panels for "Hindsight/Fore-site," part of Murphy's body of work focused on Hemings. Right: Murphy's 12-foot tall mixed media *Sally Hemings* for the "Hindsight/Fore-site" exhibition.

Murphy's achievements as a painter are remarkable enough. But what sent me to his new studio in Staunton is that he has recently been moving outside the painted frame: he has developed ambitious plans for his community and created a large outdoor sculpture that has embroiled him in a risky controversy.

After talking to the artist over a couple of days, I discovered that Murphy's new work — his public sculpture and community-based art alike — is both new and not new.

What is really distinctive in his oeuvre is the component of time and narrative. From the very beginning, Murphy has enjoyed mystery, play, and interaction and has generally chosen materials that, as he says, "already show the signs of time." In many ways, this ties in with the Southern literary tradition, with its world of abandoned mansions, haunts, and other strange presences. But the link becomes stronger once you recognize that Murphy has a Faulkneresque commitment to place and an affinity for narratives involving strong heroines who resemble the bold adven-



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turer-victims of Gothic romances.

This interest in narrative has continued in Murphy's newest works. In his recent outdoor public sculpture about the controversial figure of Sally Hemings that he contributed to the "Hindsight/Fore-site" exhibition (reviewed in the August issue of **64**), Murphy has fixed on a story that ties the genre of Southern romance to the realms of history and politics. The Hemings story has all the basic elements of a Gothic romance: a young helpless woman who is shrouded in mystery and a powerful, probably very hypocritical older man. Since the latter figure happens to have been a United States president, the story of Jefferson's love affair with his slave continues to elicit passionate responses. The same could be said of Murphy's public sculpture, which has been attacked both physically and intellectually by the public.

Murphy's steel and fabric sculpture of Sally Hemings sits upon a coal tower near Charlottesville's downtown mall (you can check out www.toddmurphy.com for a video). In what Murphy euphemistically refers to as "a dialogue" he's been having with local youth, the sculpture has been repeatedly vandalized and then carefully rebuilt by Murphy and his helpers. In a similar way his paintings in the nearby Second Street Gallery have elicited a strong response from Charlottesville's adult community. Of the three large panels in this show — one of which depicts a female figure (Hemings) with a falcon, the second a family of zebras, the third a museum wall of stuffed monkeys — it is the last piece, the wall of monkey specimens, which has come under criticism. Murphy — not surprised by the controversy — takes issue with his critics on a few points. In his way of thinking, the monkey panel forms part of an ongoing investigation of natural history and taxonomy. He sees the work as a study of how we organize the world's diversity into species and races. The illusion of order created by these sciences — remember the word "science," like the word "scissors," comes from a root mean-

ing to cut, to divide — conceals a deeper irrationality and disorderly unity.

Whatever Murphy's intentions, the panels are read differently by his critics. This group — comprised in part of writers, university professors, and other intellectuals who gathered at a reading at the Second Street Gallery this summer — have identified a passage in Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* where, in the midst of a pseudo-scientific evaluation of African intellectual and physical abilities, Jefferson pauses to describe the love of orangutans for black women. It is just possible, they believe, that Murphy's paintings allude to this kind of presumed interspecies affinity — which would tighten the artist's connections with Jefferson's 18th-century prejudices.

These opinions have a familiar, polarized sound. Yet the heated issues in this controversy can seem very distant from a viewer of Murphy's work when he or she stands, as I recently have, before one of his large paintings such as *The Courage of Margaret Mead*. Like the more controversial works Murphy has created, this painting takes on the theme of taxonomy and the motif of the female figure; it depicts a young Margaret Mead facing a natural history display case. The painting is fairly innocent in its aestheticism and also because it approaches the themes of natural history and anthropology with a rather uncontroversial topic: birds. The work also evokes a 19th-century painting by Charles Wilson Peale, *The Artist in His Museum*, insofar as both paintings share a chaotic foreground space, a mediating figure, and a carefully organized display space behind.

The Courage of Margaret Mead is housed in a cavernous studio, part of a larger complex — one of many that Murphy has renovated over the years for himself. The artist lives with his wife and newborn child upstairs in rooms that are as airy and light-infused as the lower rooms are dark and Gothic. From this space, Murphy has been planning other very ambitious ventures that he hopes will affect his entire community.

When speaking about these community-oriented projects, Murphy can sound vague and elusive until you realize that he is just purposely keeping his ideas open-ended. Like German sculptor Joseph Beuys, Murphy sees everything and every person around him as potentially involved in an art making activity. Beuys used the term "social sculpture" to refer to his Utopian dream that the fabric of society could become a kind of artwork in which everyone participates, and Murphy relishes this term especially for the positive air it gives to transient, interpersonal creations. This in turn hooks up with his own interest in narrative and temporality.

Presently Murphy's plans for Virginia-based "social sculpture" focus on a space a few doors down from his own on Staunton's Beverley Street. The building that houses this space is a former Odd-fellows lodge, which was renovated into a faux Tudor hotel before being ravaged by fire 50 years ago. Murphy bought the structure last year and used it briefly as a studio before moving to his current place. Now he likes to walk around the structure, pointing out the possibilities for art projects in the remains of a bowling alley on the first floor and the strange sculptural shapes of a slot car racing track that once existed on the second floor. He talks about the many potentials of the building — as an adult playground, site for installations, and studio space for local artists — all with the nebulous hope that people will come in and somehow allow the building "to tell its own story."

What will happen here is not easy to predict. In fact, the whole scene — Southern Gothic ruin, Chicago-born artist, and mysterious German idea of sculpture — resembles a subject from a Todd Murphy painting. And as in the paintings, you get the distinct feeling that something vague has just happened, or may happen ... but all is open-ended.