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At His Solo Exhibition at Marc Straus Gallery, Artist Todd Murphy Creates Discourse Through Beauty



Adam Lehrer, CONTRIBUTOR

I write about New York's art gallery system and museum structure. [FULL BIO](#)

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Georgia raised, Brooklyn-based mixed-media artist Todd Murphy isn't exactly "underrated." Over three decades Murphy has quietly amassed a trove of high profile collectors including Uma Thurman, Sir Elton John and Bon Jovi and his work is included in The High Museum of Art, The New Orleans Museum and The Tampa Museum of Art. Despite those accolades, his output remains rather unappreciated in the upper echelons of his adopted home of New York's fine art world. This can only be attributed to his practice being slightly out of vogue. Murphy's work is aggressively and even subversively beautiful. Breathtaking beauty has fallen out of favor amongst art critics and publications that favor statements of confrontation and aesthetic assault. That is not to say that Todd's work, that envelopes painting, photography, sculpture, projection and more, isn't confrontational, his work just employs a different method of subverting viewer expectations. Murphy uses aesthetic beauty to invite the viewer to encourage them to ponder the powerful subtext within the work. "There are artists that are interested in putting off the viewer, but to me that's misinformed," says Murphy. "I'm interested in connection, which is a provocation of the art world in a way. Critics and writers are not at all interested in beauty. They find it outdated, I find it to be the opposite."



Mixed-media artist Todd Murphy, portrait by Adam Lehrer

It should come as little surprise then that Murphy's artworks outside a purely conceptual angle and can be appreciated from a lament aesthetic viewpoint; Murphy has designed interiors and art directed films and once had to file a cease and desist letter when his lush Dress sculptures and paintings were co-opted, mass produced and sold by a well-known home furnishings company without Murphy's knowledge. Murphy has no problem with people viewing his work aesthetically but unsurprisingly relies on the practice of meticulous installation to ensure that his eye-pleasing art doesn't lose its substantial subtext, pathos, and ideology. Indicative of this duality in his work was *Coal Tower*, a 30-ft monument erected in the honor of rumored Thomas Jefferson mistress Sally Hemings that Murphy installed in plain sight in Staunton, Virginia. Viewers of the installation didn't know what to make of the monument at first, passing by and remarking on its general "prettiness." When people learned who the monument was built for, a rare wave of contemplation emanated through the town. "It was just this beautiful thing," says Murphy. "But then a woman at a coffee shop came up to tell me that she and her daughter stared at it under a full moon and wept. When people realized it was a monument to Sally Hemings, it created a whole new dialog."

I visited Murphy at his studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard and have never been so moved by an artist's working space. Harsh found materials made of wood and concrete live side by side with Todd's paintings and sculptures. Having developed an interest in mechanics, numerous pre-technological machines and trinkets litter its wide and tall space. But most impressive was the finished work that was to be installed for Murphy's first solo exhibition in New York at Marc Straus Gallery that opens on Sunday, October 23. Using the dress as the show's central visual motif as an exploration of the lost appreciation of the sacred symmetries, Murphy scavenged thrift shops and junk yards to find discarded materials that he would weld and craft into these obscenely beautiful pieces as part of his *Murmurations* series. Combining natural materials with oil painted plexiglass, each piece feels like the subject of its own poem. Murphy calls my attention to one piece, plexiglass oil painted panels create the figure of a dress filled with wood to resemble deer antlers, and brings out a projector aiming its light at the sculpture. A video starts projecting on the sculpture depicting Murphy's young daughter in childhood bliss before morphing into serene scenes of nature and skies: the spiritual, the natural, and the technological all dance and join as one. I spoke with Murphy about his exhibition at Marc Straus and the importance of beauty in contemporary art.



Todd Murphy, 'Stag,' image courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery

Adam Lehrer: Does your work evolve with the location you're working in?

Todd Murphy: Yes, absolutely. Like a writer, I think location is a character. It's not like I moved to New York and suddenly was painting the Empire State Building. All you have to do is go to another city to remember how rich New York is. There's no city like it. Certain elements seep in. I become more aware of place and the place informs you. All you have to do is go to another city to remember how rich New York is. There's no city like it.

Adam Lehrer: As far as conceptual art is concerned, yours is rather easy on the eyes, for lack of a better term. Is beauty a strategy for you?

Todd Murphy: I try to make my art approachable. The average person not interested in art can appreciate my work for its beauty. Someone deeper into art can see the different layers. What's outdated is how art has rendered itself

irrelevant to most people. It's like being a musician making music so cacophonous that very few people want to listen to it. Do you know how risky it is to make something beautiful at this point? Even to make something aesthetic, that's not performative or conceptual? It's very challenging.

Adam Lehrer: What artists helped you form your philosophy?

Todd Murphy: [Anselm] Kiefer. Especially the earlier stuff, his large allegorical pieces and his use of materials. I agreed with him more than I was influenced by him. The way that I was thinking off the assemblage of materials on canva. Arte Povera, and their use of basic, non-art materials. And Dada. The use of everyday objects being re-contextualized as sculpture. And then the old master paintings that dealt with line, edge and light.





Todd Murphy, 'Murmurations (Piney Woods),' photo by Todd Murphy

Adam Lehrer: You created discourse about white privilege in your work a long time ago, far before it became a subject everyone was discussing. How did it become such a big part of your thought process and approach?

Todd Murphy: Well, I'm not a poor black guy. Growing up in the south certainly makes you aware of it. I was completely moved and provoked by the music. I just thought Ray Charles and James Brown was the music. Nina Simone. And just the aesthetics of the south: decay and rust. I went to school in Athens, Georgia.

Adam Lehrer: Where REM is from?

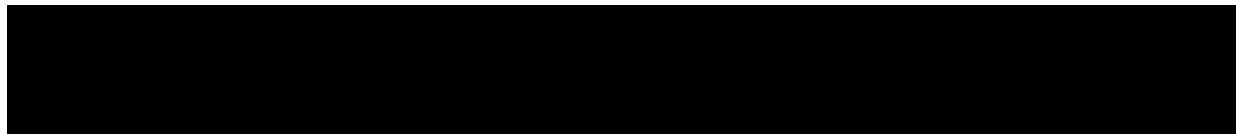
Todd Murphy: Yeah, those guys are all my friends.

Adam Lehrer: Those college towns are fascinating, Tucson was like that: A liberal haven in a deeply conservative area. A very specific kind of radicalism is bred in those areas.

Todd Murphy: Absolutely. Georgia is deeply conservative, but Athens was a pocket of ultra-liberalism. So you get every experience. Brooklyn now isn't even as cool as Athens was then. [The University of Georgia] was OK, but the

community was incredible.





Todd Murphy, 'Murmurations,' image courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery

Adam Lehrer: I wanted to ask you about your dress motif in the work, do you have an appreciation of fashion?

Todd Murphy: Yes, probably from fashion magazines in my youth that also featured writing about culture and art and theater, but I came to appreciate fashion as symbols. How we adorn and describe ourselves aesthetically is through fashion. Alexander McQueen came out and he was more of an artist than a designer. What he was playing with is something I just agreed with.

Adam Lehrer: A sense of the macabre and the theatrical?

Todd Murphy: Yes. And fashion as semiotics.

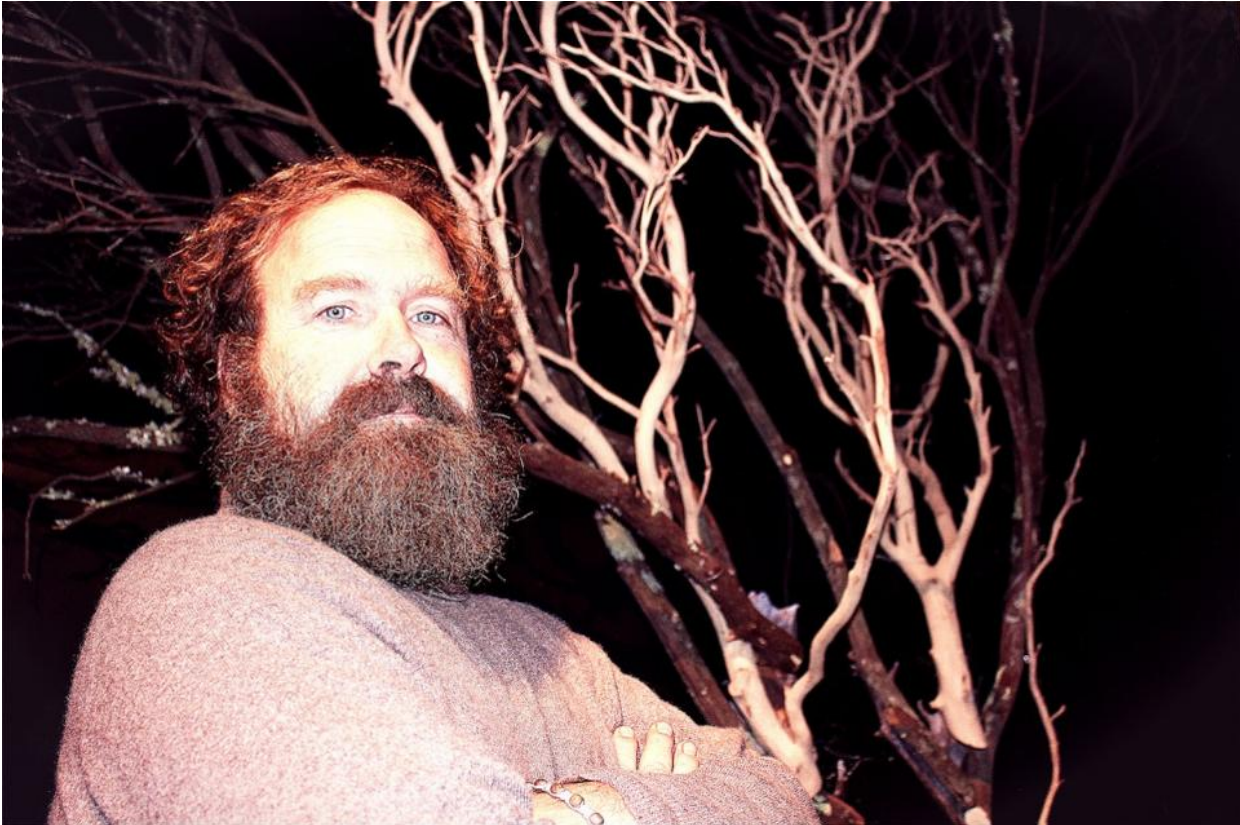
Adam Lehrer: I read something about you being interested in the contradiction within man being a privileged species against us being one aspect of the web of nature. Do you think awareness is a privilege?

Todd Murphy: I think self-awareness is a privilege, definitely. What's also interesting though is that self-awareness can be a curse. But to be contemplative and thoughtful in your practice, whether it's art or writing or accounting, is a challenge. But there's an opportunity there.

Adam Lehrer: If I did have to identify a privilege it would be the ability to document eras and therefore be able to know what happened before us. To know history.

Todd Murphy: Exactly. And now with computing, the cumulative knowledge of everything we know is right there.

Adam Lehrer: I do get a somber tone in the work sometimes, do you deal with the concept of mortality in the work?



portrait by Adam Lehrer

Todd Murphy: Yes, and my work is beginning to become more machine-like. Which is how we're going. There are very large questions about god, mortality, and death merging with Artificial Intelligence. Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and Warren Buffet have weighed in on this. It's not a question of if AI is possible, it's about when will AI be implemented. There are talks of being able to upload and suspend one's consciousness infinitely in a computer database.

Adam Lehrer: Do you believe in god?

Todd Murphy: I do, do you?

Adam Lehrer: No, even as a child I didn't.

Todd Murphy: I just think god is love. Something that people from all over the world and history have identified with.

Adam Lehrer: Growing up in Georgia I assume you had religion all around

you. Did you grapple with religion at all?

Todd Murphy: Yeah for a long time I did. I was raised Catholic. Intellectually, trying to wrap my head around AI and eternal existence, I had to ask myself, “What is human?” We are the network. We always have been. Humans are pack animals and we’re becoming networked. We’re problem solving collectively. Take something like Kickstarter. 10 years ago, to make a movie you’d have to go find funding from a producer. Now you can use people on the Internet to solve your problem.

Adam Lehrer: Do your ideas remain consistent throughout every medium you use or do different mediums express different ideas?

Todd Murphy: I would say I explore different themes using all the mediums available. If I’m interested in a subject, I’ll do it. I’m a huge fan of George Stubbs, who did horse paintings. What I love about deer, elk, and the like is that they have this really transformative period where the antlers are covered in velvet. So I made some sculptures with velvet. But I could never do a moose painting because it was illogical to where I come from. I never do a painting that is irrelevant to my location. But the deer and the dresses, these pieces invite different viewpoints. Some people see my art and they see something peaceful, some see something dark and frightening.

Adam Lehrer: Malcolm Gladwell recently said that there are two different kinds of artists: conceptual artists find their voice almost immediately and do their best work early in their lives, and experimental artists have to try over and over until they get the sense of what it is they are trying to do. Which applies more to you?

Todd Murphy: B, for sure. And now I’m starting to experiment more than ever with mechanical things, so I’ve started building machines.

Adam Lehrer: Are you exploring how tech and nature work together?

Todd Murphy: And how they’re merging. I’m not a mechanical engineer, but I’m very curious. To create naively is interesting. Mechanics are magic to me. I maintain curiosity. It keeps life interesting.

Adam Lehrer: You've also designed interior, is it a challenge working within a set of parameters?

Todd Murphy: Installation is important to me. I'm not a group show guy. I'd rather create an environment. People have been to my studio and told me they like how I deal with space. So I did a couple interiors. I did one high-end Japanese sushi restaurant. In Japanese culture, there is a tradition of charring wood. It's a natural pesticide and a preservative. Once it crystallizes it'll stay the way it is for a long time. So I told these guys I'd do an entire burnt wood interior, they told me I was hired. I don't run away from beautiful. Even Alexander McQueen made beautiful things. So to make something that is aesthetically beautiful that people want in their interior, that isn't totally at odds with my art. There is an infinite number of possibilities within those parameters.