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VISUAL ARTS: An evolution in Murphy's natural order

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REVIEW

Todd Murphy

Through Tuesday.

10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. today; 11 a.m.-5:30 Saturday; 10 a.m.- 5:30 p.m. Tuesday. Price range: \$3,000-\$85,000. Lowe Gallery, 75 Bennett St., Suite A-2. 404-352-8114.

The verdict: **Murphy** pursues enduring interests, taking them in new and sometimes successful directions.

Todd Murphy has long pursued his interest in natural history and the figure, whether in monumental, moody mixed-media paintings (photo blowups behind a piece of plexiglass painted with tar), tabletop sculptures constructed of odds and ends, installations or works on paper. He takes his formats and his themes in new directions in a sprawling exhibition at Lowe Gallery.

First, the figure. In the past, the former Atlanta artist, who now lives in Virginia, has substituted a dress for a person, and he riffed off of African sculpture in his assemblage sculpture. In these collages and paintings, **Murphy** simplifies the form into silhouettes, some inspired by paper cutout dolls and others by African figurines. He substitutes fabric for photos in the plexi pieces, thus introducing texture and pattern by means of fur, aged mattress ticking and so forth. The collages are even more pared-down -- frequently a single figure, perhaps a ragged brown paper doll isolated on white paper. Placement and texture are key to their effect.

The collages are quite elegant in their simplicity and pleasing to the eye. The plexiglass pieces are more formulaic; they seem more about design and good taste than art. Certainly they lack the mystery of prior work.

Murphy the naturalist takes over in the main gallery, with sporadic success. Mimicking the profession's habit of classifying and ordering objects, he arranges actual specimens -- nests, eggs -- on huge expanses of colored cloth. While it's a pleasure to admire the wonder of nature, these pieces function better as natural history displays than as objets d'art. I suppose one could call up Marcel Duchamp's upside-down

urinal to support these pieces, but Duchamp's sculpture was making a statement about the nature of imagination and its relationship to art, while this looks to go no further than the nature of nature.

Two pieces here (all are untitled) overcome this problem. The one that displays stuffed birds, decoys and birdlike forms that **Murphy** fashions out of such things as a Santa Claus hat evinces an appealing wit and play between reality and forms of illusion. The other, which measures a huge 9 by 13 feet, is a tour de force of sculpture -- found ones and those of his own devising fill a khaki-colored burlap field. The piece is a reprise of **Murphy**'s three-dimensional work, ranging from references to pieces in his one-person show at the High Museum and his transformations of African sculptures to modernist abstraction.

Perhaps this work pleases me because I am a fan of **Murphy**'s sculpture. It also has the most heart.
Photo: An untitled sculpture of birds by Virginia artist **Todd Murphy**.