

Local artist

Todd Murphy; Southern Modernist

by Ann Lovett

Famous Southern artist Todd Murphy is back at the Lowe Gallery with yet another powerful and innovative exhibit. The master of creative trailblazing, Murphy has once again taken his art to a new level.

Born in Chicago to a family of Irish heritage, Murphy was raised in Atlanta and educated at the University of Georgia. An Atlanta-bred artist, Murphy has been a first-hand witness (and key contributor) to the maturation of the Atlanta and Southern arts scenes since his debut in the early 1990s. He is keenly aware of the South's cultural history and its corresponding fascination with the "signs of time" (i.e., chivalry and gentility, abandoned mansions and plantations, the impacts of racism, Southern Gothic clichés, etc.).

In fact, some art aficionados have dubbed him as the "Southern modernist" or the "South's favorite son." As Bill Lowe of the Lowe Gallery once explained in an "Art And Collecting" article, "Todd's first show with the Lowe Gallery lay the groundwork for a career which can best be described as 'mythic' in terms of the Southern arts scene. During that evening, over a five-hour period, 3,000 guests stamped our gallery, and the entire show sold out! I had never, nor have I since, seen anything like it."

In addition to his "mythic" Atlanta presence, Murphy has enjoyed strong platforms elsewhere. His work has been exhibited and esteemed in Charlottesville (where he and his family currently reside), Charlotte, Chicago, Jacksonville, Mobile, New Orleans, New York, San Francisco, Tampa and, not surprisingly, on the celebrity circuit. Lowe describes Murphy's work as having a "hugely romantic and theatrical quality" to it, thus making him the "darling" of the ultra-rich. Sting, Michael Stipe, Halle Berry, Elton John and Antonio "L.A." Reid are among the many A-list stars who double as Todd Murphy patrons.

National exhibits and celebrity names aside, Murphy maintains a low-key response to the hype surrounding his work. Throughout his career, he has been resolutely committed to slowly building a body of work, which he deems important for emerging artists. He encourages them "to recognize their power and creativity, to use their creativity in sustainable ways ... and steer clear of immediate decisions. "Good work that people respond to is deliberate."

For that reason, Murphy is meticulous and deliberate in "finding" inspiration. Intrigued by the concepts of change and order, Murphy's art has been influenced by natural taxonomy, archaeology, anthropology and the effects of cultural, historical and scientific change. To that end, he enjoys studying the scholars of change and order, such as Aristotle, Adam Smith, Darwin, Einstein, Linnaeus and Newton, among others.

His ongoing work has been reviewed by critics with varying degrees of praise over the years -- be it sculpture, painting, photo collage, Plexiglas-covered photomontages

or community-based art. Murphy enthusiasts have applauded his ability to produce intellectually challenging work and then package it in a visually "heroic" and "majestic" manner (his 1999 painting, "The Courage of Margaret Mead").

Critics, on the other hand, have pointed a finger at Murphy for being too controversial -- for crossing the proverbial line in the sand (his 2000 Sally Hemings pieces, which were included in Charlottesville's "Hindsight/Fore-sight" exhibit).

Nonetheless, Murphy devotees and detractors can agree on one thing: Murphy possesses an uncanny ability to engage his audience -- to be bold and demand attention while doing so. Albeit, his style may change with each new exhibit, but his creative sincerity remains steadfast.

Lowe gallery representative Jessica Setzler

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expressed similar sentiments after viewing Murphy's latest collection. "The first thing that hit me about his new body of work was that Todd has managed to remain consistently passionate about his favorite subjects -- natural history, anthropology and cinema -- while continuing to push the envelope with regard to imagery and his use of materials." Different from previous exhibits, "He has focused on simple shapes, lines and patterns with the idea in mind that anthropologists and archaeologists uncover the keys to humanity and civilization through the most simple found objects (i.e., bones, simple clay bowls, early tool forms)."

When asked to describe what's ahead on the road of change, Murphy gives a quintessentially vague response. He expresses interest in pursuing "different cite-specific creative projects, in infusing creativity not on a canvas, but in space, and different spectrums." Southern modernist fans can rest assured. Murphy's cycle of change will continue.

For more information on Todd Murphy, visit www.lowegallery.com or call The Lowe Gallery at (404) 352-8114.

